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August Wilson's Play Cycle: A Healing Black Rage for

Contemporary African Americans

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August Wilson's Play Cycle: A Healing Black Rage for Contemporary African Americans

by

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August Wilson's Play Cycle: A Healing Black Rage for Contemporary African Americans

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With this dissertation, I intend to answer the following question: In producing an African-American genealogy through his play cycle, how does August Wilson recuperate the experiences and politics of black rage as a means of healing for contemporary African Americans?

August Wilson is a leading American playwright whose works have been produced from Broadway to California to the heartland. He won the 1987 and 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Fences and The Piano Lesson, respectively. With his speech, "The Ground On Which I Stand," delivered to the Theatre Communications Group's Eleventh National Conference in Princeton, New Jersey in June of 1996, Wilson galvanized a national debate on race and culture.

Since 1981, Wilson has been writing a ten-play cycle of history plays dealing with the African-American experience, with each play in the cycle chronicling a specific decade of the twentieth century: Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988), set in

1911; Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1981), set in 1927; The Piano Lesson (1990), set in 1936; Seven Guitars (1996), set in 1948; Fences (1986), set in 1957; Two Trains Running (1992), set in 1969; Jitney (1979), set in 1977; and King Hedley II (not published), set in 1985.

The focus of my analysis is the black rage exhibited by key characters throughout Wilson's cycle. In Killing Rage: Ending Racism, black rage scholar bell hooks argues that black rage is born out of displaced grief and pain; when compared to anger, rage is distinctive in that it is embodied to a deeper degree. My goal with this dissertation is to provide some shelter to African Americans by urging them to acknowledge the daily bombardment of racism, how it connects to continuous grief and pain, and point out that by owning the pain, the African American in question can become empowered by it. I intend to read the ways in which Wilson recuperates a "healing black rage" for contemporary African Americans. In doing so, I will answer the following questions: what are the various forms of black rage in Wilson's plays? What precipitates the rage? What are its effects, and consequences?

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Introduction

Since 1619, when the first African was brought to Jamestown, Virginia, American race relations have been an important topic of study, as witnessed by the plethora of books, articles, plays, and dissertations on the subject. With August Wilson's body of work and this dissertation, the investigation continues. Wilson, a major playwright whose works have been and continue to be produced from Broadway to California, illuminates the African-American experience in his cycle of history plays.

In producing this African-American genealogy, how does Wilson recuperate the experiences and politics of black rage as a means of healing for contemporary African Americans? Wilson uses different types of black rage to show his African-American audience how to navigate their way through American society. Why should we pay attention to Wilson's dramatizing of yesterday's black rage and its consequences? For a number of reasons: to see how far race relations have come in this country, to learn our own history, to use the past to make our paths into the future smoother, and to pay homage to the ancestors who paved the way for us. Black rage is a useful tool for analyzing Wilson's plays since he uses his characters' respective embodiments of black rage to define his characters. Their respective rages oftentimes leads to their own self-discovery, which delivers a powerful message to his audience about the importance and necessity of black rage. In an interview with Wilson, he elaborated: "[black rage is] certainly within the plays. Certainly what I would call political elements that deal with outrage: moral outrage, social outrage. Yes, that is a part of it, that's a part of the plays, yes, that's a part of black American life" (Wilson,

13 Nov. 1998). In Wilson's plays, black rage exposes the various facets of African-American life and history. Black rage can help us discover what it means to be Africans in America.

Since 1981, Wilson has been writing a ten-play cycle of history plays dealing with African-American life, each play in the cycle chronicling a specific decade of the twentieth century. Wilson has written the following plays: Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988), set in 1911; Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1981), set in 1927; The Piano Lesson (1990), set in 1936; Seven Guitars (1996), set in 1948; Fences (1986), set in 1957; Two Trains Running (1992), set in 1969; Jitney (1979), set in 1977; and King Hedley II (not published), set in 1985. With each decade, Wilson tracks a slice of African-American life, never losing sight of the ancestors who came before. Although Wilson is not writing about his own specific lineage, he is shining a massive spotlight on an African-American family tree, illuminating those niggers, Negroes, Coloreds and Blacks who made American history simply by existing and surviving, paving the way for contemporary African Americans.

These triumphs and tragedies in Wilson's plays are the building blocks of his theatrical genealogy and uphold the legacy for present and future African Americans. For Wilson, the tribulations are as important to African-American self-understanding as the victories; the suffering played a part in developing who African Americans are today. There is no growth without struggle; rage and resistance are symbiotic. Wilson believes that ignoring the pain and struggle of the past will prevent present-day African Americans from growing. This is why Wilson argues that African Americans have to embrace the past, even the odious parts, in order to move forward. Each play in Wilson's cycle is a branch that makes up the African-American family

tree; these branches do not define African-American history—they are merely a part of it. Accordingly, Wilson has become an ambassador for some members of the African-American community.

In his function as spokesperson and playwright, Wilson has accrued a number of firsts: he is the first and only African-American playwright to have two plays, Fences and Joe Turner's Come and Gone, running on Broadway simultaneously ("August Wilson's Come to Stay" 82). Wilson has won the 1987 and 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Fences and The Piano Lesson, the first and only African American to win the Pulitzer in Drama twice. Wilson has been and continues to be heralded by critics as an exceptional dramatist, as evidenced by his five New York Drama Critics Circle Awards ("Theater: Will It Play on Broadway?" 321). Critic Vincent Canby declares "that Mr. Wilson possesses the magic of a wizard and the richest voice in the contemporary American theater" ("'Joe Turner' Displays Its Wizardry" 5).

With his speech, "The Ground On Which I Stand," delivered to the Theatre Communications Group's Eleventh National Conference in Princeton, New Jersey, in June 1996, Wilson galvanized a national debate on race and culture. In this speech, he all but demanded fully funded African-American theaters for African-American actors, directors, and other theater practitioners. Wilson pointed out that of the 66 theaters that are members of the League of Resident Theatres, only one could be considered African-American—the Crossroads Theater in New Brunswick, New Jersey. ("The Ground On Which I Stand" 16; "Energizing the Future of Black Theater" E3; "Plea Heeded for Meeting on Black Theater" B1). Wilson hoped to bring attention to this sad fact by highlighting the reality of economics and race: "Black theater in America is alive…it is vibrant…it is vital…it just isn't funded"

("The Ground On Which I Stand" 16). Wilson expected that his speech would activate African-American theater practitioners' rage, motivating them to change the sorry state of African-American theater on a national level.

As a result of and testimony to Wilson's cultural power, Dartmouth College sponsored a conference in March, 1998, where black theater artists came together, as Wilson asked, to "'address questions of esthetics and to defend ourselves from naysayers'" ("Plea Heeded for Meeting on Black Theater" B1). This incendiary speech also earlier led to a highly publicized Town Hall meeting in New York City on January 27, 1997, between Wilson and critic Robert Brustein, titled "On Cultural Power" (B1; "Oratory vs. Really Talking About Culture" C11). Between his plays and his cultural criticism, Wilson has given voice to the African-American experience, leading to further examination of African Americans' placement within American society.

August Wilson

Frederick August Kittel was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945. He purchased his first typewriter on April 1, 1964, and began writing poetry (Arkatov 35). In Pittsburgh, from 1965 through 1968, Wilson worked with other black writers at the Centre Avenue Poet's Theatre Workshop and the Half Way Art Gallery (Reed 95). In 1967, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson xv). In the late 1960s, Frederick August Kittel became August Wilson, eradicating his father's first and last name, maintaining his middle name and adopting his mother's maiden name as his last (20). He wrote The Coldest Day of the Year in 1977, which was similar to his 1973 play, Recycle ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson" 541). In 1977,

at the urging of a friend, Wilson transformed some of his poems into a play (a musical satire) called Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, which premiered in 1981 at St. Paul's Penumbra Theater. While in St. Paul, Wilson wrote scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota, all the while perfecting his ability to write dialogue (Reed 95-96). In 1982, Wilson submitted Ma Rainey's Black Bottom to the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, after having revised it for the previous seven years; the play was accepted for a workshop, where Wilson met his future friend and collaborator, Lloyd Richards, the artistic director of the National Playwrights Conference. This collaboration marked the beginning of Wilson's career as one of America's premier contemporary playwright.

Wilson writes his characters to expose the grief and pain that they carry as a direct result of their blackness. Wilson's characters rage because a large percentage of them have been unjustly imprisoned by white men, because they can not see a way out of their lives, and because they are always fighting for a foothold in a societal system that only pays attention to the man on top. Wilson knows the social history of African Americans; his characters speak about the sting of persecution inherent in their situations. Wilson allows his characters to grieve, because he knows that their real-life counterparts could not find their own unique voices in American society. This is Wilson's job–to give voice to these unknown African Americans. Consequently, Wilson trumpets the unbalanced "playing field" between European Americans and African Americans by making his characters feel anguish and express rage, in order to guide modern-day African Americans through these obstacles.

This study, which hopes to nourish present-day African Americans, probes Wilson's play cycle and the usefulness of black rage for contemporary African

Americans, showing how black rage functions within each of the six plays. In four out of the six plays, black rage is used as a healing tool; in the other two, both of which are cautionary tales, black rage leads to murder. I will investigate how Wilson uses each play to depict black rage, with the hope that each play's message can help guide African Americans in how to deal with American race relations and their own black rage.

Black Rage

When compared to anger, which is defined in Cambridge International Dictionary of English as "a strong feeling against someone or a situation," rage is distinctive in that it is more deeply embodied—it is extreme or violent anger. Whereas anger is a surface *feeling*, which usually dissipates relatively quickly, rage is a penetrating sensibility that informs a person's essence and generally leads to *action*. Furthermore, rage is distinguished from frustration ("to annoy, or discourage/prevent someone from doing something") and bitterness (a variation on anger). Wilson's passionate plays call for the deepest level of feeling, which is why it is valid to examine rage in his plays, as opposed to anger, bitterness, or frustration, although all of these emotions are also present.

In Killing Rage: Ending Racism (1995), African-American cultural critic bell hooks argues that black rage is born out of displaced grief and pain; black rage springs out of abuses and humiliations and is usually activated by racial oppression. hooks states that as long as American racism exists, there will be black rage. The expression of black rage begins with a catalyst—a racist event; if other catalysts occur, the rage increases to the next level of emotional expression, which usually leads to some larger, consequential action. Such rage is not usually realized on

account of one circumstance, but rather because a number of events build to a trigger point. Although black rage, in real life and in Wilson's plays, is often instigated because of negative conditions, hooks, Wilson, and I believe that black rage does not have to live in the negative. Primarily, I intend to read the ways in which Wilson recuperates a "healing black rage" for contemporary African Americans. Each of Wilson's plays exhibits a distinct form of black rage, which can be recognized by asking and answering the following questions: how is it expressed, what precipitates it, and what are its effects?

hooks argues that the constant bombardment of racism on African Americans affects them physically and emotionally. With no obvious solution to the race problem in America and no protection from the bombardment, African Americans are constantly brought down, experiencing anguish and distress as a result of these life experiences. Since this pain and grief are routinely repressed, if and when they are unleashed, they are often displaced to "the wrong person." hooks's goal is to provide some shelter to African Americans by urging them to acknowledge the daily bombardment, to realize how racism and black rage connect to continuous grief and pain, and to admit and own the ache. By governing the anguish, African Americans can become empowered by it. hooks argues that black rage, while it often leads to misdirected bouts of violence, can be used as a healing tool. By recognizing that there is strength behind the emotions that cause rage, hooks maintains that the negativity surrounding black rage can be co-opted into a motivating force.

In Wilson's plays, racial oppression at the hands of European Americans is always the catalyst for black rage, which is what I assumed would be the case when I began this study; however, the articulation of black rage is more complex than simple

black vs. white. Although European Americans serve as catalyst for black rage, this is the extent of their involvement in healing rage. The healing rage that Wilson trumpets in four of his six plays is not about the tribulations of being black in White America, but rather is about using healing rage to benefit members of the African-American community. In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson, Fences, and Two Trains Running, a character's display of black rage, although oftentimes presented as destructive originally, eventually makes every African-American character in the play stronger, and thus the community becomes more powerful. He suggests that black rage does not have to be a totally detrimental phenomenon, but rather can heal the people it affects. hooks urges using the power and energy behind the rage to achieve revolutionary goals that will improve socio-political conditions in America.

Having grown up in the apartheid South, hooks realized the necessity of repressing black rage at an early age, because expressing it to white people could lead to death. Like most African Americans in the segregated South, she learned to choke down her rage (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 13-14). Before young hooks attended a predominantly white university, her rage had not been triggered yet. After her immersion into higher education, hooks began to realize that she was not in touch with her rage. As she read Malcolm X's autobiography, she started to recognize her first feelings of political rage against racism. As hooks continued to read about the emotions she was feeling, she acknowledged that she was changing (15-16). hooks recalls: "Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct" (16). This awareness was hooks's first realization that rage does not have

to be just destructive, but rather can be used for healing purposes as well. By "construct," hooks is referring to empowering herself as well as the larger African-American community.

hooks now believes that the only way to control black rage is to be open and honest about it. Furthermore, she states:

> Only as African Americans break with the culture of shame that has demanded that we be silent about our pain will we be able to engage wholistic strategies for healing that will break this cycle. Without surrendering the meaningful legacy of triumph over adversity that has been such a dynamic aspect of black experience in the United States, we must always make a place for the acknowledgment of unresolved, recurring psychological pain (144).

Healing can never begin until the problem is acknowledged. Once African Americans remove the shame from black rage, it can be discussed. hooks contends that, by talking about the grief and pain that racism inspires, African Americans will be empowered. Talking about racism and suffering legitimizes it as an important topic. At the same time, hooks asserts, admitting racial oppression does not make one weak or does not make African Americans any less triumphant. It places them on the road to healing.

hooks advocates the demonstration of rage as healing tool because to repress one's rage is to allow it to fester, to threaten implosion (139). She suggests that releasing this rage, in a constructive manner, is the healthier option. In her text, hooks describes how an European-American man on an airplane triggered her rage. hooks makes it clear that she was not just angry with the man, she wanted to kill him. Though she did not commit murder, hooks did indirectly take action against the man, as she confronted his racism. Writing her text helped hooks deal with her rage. hooks recalls, "I did listen to my rage, allowed it to motivate me to take pen in hand

and write in the heat of that moment" (19). She did not repress her rage; instead, she took a stand, spoke out, and expressed her pain (19). By articulating her anguish and rage, hooks was able to obtain healing. Thus, because of her rage, she was able to cope with and move beyond the racist experience that triggered her rage. The manifestation of her rage, and then the result of it—her text—demonstrates the link between black rage and healing.

hooks argues that rage is a mandatory part of resistance, with rage serving as the ground plan for daring acts. She suggests that as one channels his/her rage to improve his/her social standing, this will result in individual and communal healing (16). This mending is intricately tied to empowerment, as the more one is empowered, the psychologically healthier he/she is (19). By embracing and utilizing one's rage, healing begins as individual pain is named and dealt with (137).

Though I primarily use bell hooks's black rage theory, I felt it prudent to acknowledge that there are other examples of scholarship that deal with black rage. For example, in the area of black psychology, psychologists William S. Hall, William E. Cross, Jr., and Roy Freedle, in their article, "Stages in the Development of Black Awareness: An Exploratory Investigation," examine various ways in which changes in the interaction between African Americans and European Americans, via integration, have led to black identity transformation. Continuing with this train of thought, it is possible that this change could trigger instances of black rage that could be deemed destructive. Hall, Cross, and Freedle suggest that as African Americans assimilate into American (read: white) society, some identity transformation is going to occur. The psychologists focus on how African Americans perceive themselves as they undergo these changes. As a result of this study, the authors have deduced that it

is possible that feelings of inferiority, confusion of self-worth, and dependency on white society could result from this identity transformation, which can then lead to instances of rage.

Cross, with some support from Hall, has formulated his own hypothesis about black identity. Cross argues that there are five stages that African Americans go through when they encounter blackness in themselves. Of these stages, I argue only one—the immersion stage—sets the groundwork for the potential expression of black rage.

This is one of the reasons that I focus on hooks—she most specifically deals with black rage. Cross, et. al. do not explicitly study black rage, they only reference it as a point in a larger argument.

Black rage has lost the theoretical and activist currency it held in the 1960s. In that decade, black rage, while not sweeping the nation, at least influenced it, according to William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs's Black Rage (1968). Black rage often led to changes on college campuses and government buildings, because it was rooted in theory and supported action (Cowan and Maguire 259; Hornsby 197). Occasionally, America would see and acknowledge the societal conditions that led to bouts of black rage, but this all changed in the 1990s. In "Black Rage/White Guilt: Act II," Sanford Pinsker observes that now, "Black rage is finally as much a strategy as a condition, and in terms of sheer escalation it now threatens to join the cries of 'Wolf!' and 'The sky is falling'" (739). If the legitimate power behind black rage is overused or misused, eventually the entire concept becomes flaccid.

When Pinsker calls black rage a "strategy," he was undoubtedly referring to William Kunstler and Ron Kuby's defense of Colin Ferguson, the man who shot 25

and killed 6 people on the Long Island Railroad on December 7, 1993. Kunstler and Kuby's defense rested on the notion that black rage caused Ferguson's shooting spree (Pooley 38). While Ferguson's lawyers threw around the term "black rage," they did not seem to understand the totality of the phrase. Black rage does not exempt anyone from the consequences of acting on it; however, this is what Ferguson's lawyers argued. They were unsuccessful—Ferguson was convicted of 6 counts of second-degree murder and 19 counts of attempted murder on February 17, 1995. He was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison.

Unlike Ferguson's lawyers, Wilson recognizes that actions always bring consequences. In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Seven Guitars, two plays where the expression of rage leads to murder, Wilson at least alludes to punishment for the murderers, either through the legal system or through a total break with sanity. Wilson, with his ten-play cycle, and I, with this text, aim to recuperate black rage as a legitimate form of power. By discussing the pain and grief that is intrinsic to black rage, Wilson gives it that legitimate power. He talks about racism, talks about sorrow and distress; by doing this, he announces that this topic is worthy of public discussion. Wilson and his plays have spawned real-life debates; at the very least, through the critical evaluations that accompany Wilson's theatrical runs. Furthermore, his plays serve as a springboard for healing.

Black rage is an essential part of Wilson's cycle, in that at least one character in each play experiences black rage as a catalyst for self-discovery. I will focus on these characters: Loomis (Joe Turner's Come and Gone), Levee (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom), Berniece/Boy Willie (The Piano Lesson), Hedley/Floyd (Seven Guitars), Troy/Cory (Fences), Hambone/Sterling/Memphis (Two Trains Running). For those

who only understand black rage in connection with Colin Ferguson, it is equated with random, insane actions; Wilson, however, shows me that black rage is not just for the lone crazy man. It can motivate revolutionary action in anybody—the crazy and the sane. For example, in Two Trains Running, Hambone, who is perceived as crazy, motivates Sterling to engage in radical behavior at the end of the play that strengthens the entire community.

While it might be easy to assume that the black rage in Wilson's cycle lessens as the cycle progresses, this is not the case; each decade's rage is a different—not a lesser—form of the previous decade's. Also, there is no discernible conclusion about black rage when one looks at the order in which Wilson wrote his cycle. Wilson did not even realize he was writing a cycle until he was already on his third play. There is, however, a change in the suppression of black rage as civil rights laws are enacted. For example, the rage expressed in the first four plays is never directed towards white people (this is most evident in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom); however, after the first Civil Rights Act in 1957 (the time setting for Fences, the fifth play), Wilson's characters begin to reveal their rage and direct it towards white characters (as is clearly seen in Two Trains Running, set in 1969, the sixth play). I argue that this happens because the American social climate is less oppressive, beginning in the 1950s, than the first four decades of the 20th Century.

Wilson's plays fall into at least one of the following four categories of black rage: the black rage that comes from not knowing one's identity, black rage that leads to black-on-black violence, familial black rage, and black rage that results from injustice. Using these four categories, I will make my argument that Wilson employs different kinds of black rage to instruct his African-American audience what they

should and should not do as they maneuver their way through American society. Each of the six chapters will study one play in Wilson's cycle.

In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, set in 1911, black rage motivates the protagonist, Loomis, to find his "true identity," after it had been hidden during an unjust imprisonment. In Wilson's plays, "true identity" means at least one of three things: a connection to Africa, a link to the American South, and/or a bond to one's ancestors. How, then, is black rage used to determine and elucidate this identity? By the end of the play, Loomis realizes his tie to his African self because of his African predecessors.

Wilson uses black rage in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, set in 1927, to emphasize the results of the protagonist Levee's rejection of his southern past because of the painful memories it holds. How can black rage lead to self-destruction and displaced violence? Wilson's cautionary message is that you cannot reject who you are, where you are from, or your connection to your people without paying a heavy price—either self-destruction and/or the devastation of those around you.

The presentation of black rage in The Piano Lesson, set in 1936, centers on the value of a family's piano, a symbol of their ancestors. How is black rage used to clarify the danger of not respecting one's history? A sister's (Berniece) and brother's (Boy Willie) respective familial rage collides as both characters present their arguments about their ancestor's agonizing southern past. It will take these same "foreparents" to show the siblings that both their rage and their view of their past are misdirected.

In Seven Guitars, set in 1948, Hedley's black rage intensifies two things: one, his soft grip on his sanity, and two, his desire to be somebody. How does black rage

and confusion over one's identity foster violence? Hedley wants to be "a big man" because of his low position in American society and because he wants to please his deceased father; his rage-fueled drive leads to a tragic murder. Again, Wilson's message is clear—not knowing who you are can only lead to devastating results.

Fences, set in 1957, depicts how black rage can move across generations, causing families to separate. As the protagonist (Troy) and his family (wife Rose and son Cory) battle each other, what results? Previous generations both precipitate and temper the rage, leading to a healthier, more solid familial unit.

In the progression from Civil Rights to Black Power in Two Trains Running, set in 1969, how is black rage expressed, and is this rage effective? Manifestations of black rage distinguish the difference between the old way of being black (Civil Rights Movement) and the new (Black Power Movement). While both articulations are striving for the same goal—the triumph over oppression—in different ways, the end result finds the opposing political ideas helping each other. The new Black Power ideologies (with support from ancient Africa) finishes the fight begun using the old Civil Rights philosophies, with the protagonist (Sterling) bleeding for his cause.

Jitney, a play about African-American taxicab (jitney) drivers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1977, tells the story of men trying to find respect and fulfillment in a world of diminishing prospects. Only recently published, this is one of two Wilson plays that I will not examine in this study. Wilson has been working on this play since 1979, perpetually doing re-writes. I interviewed Wilson in November 1998, around the time I was completing my dissertation proposal, and asked about this play. I was told that there were many re-writes to come (Wilson, 13 Nov. 1998).

Therefore, I decided not to include Jitney in my dissertation. Rather, I decided it would be prudent to save this play for future scholarship.

Wilson's latest play, King Hedley II, set in 1985, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is a quasi-sequel to Seven Guitars. As Seven Guitars ends, Hedley is led to believe that he has fathered a child. In King Hedley II, Hedley is long gone, but his "son" is in the here and now, fighting both his past and his present. Named King Hedley II, he is trying to figure out what it means to be a black man in the 1980s, especially as an ex-convict. Some of the problems the play tackles include crime, joblessness and an old Wilson standby—the family. In addition to this, King Hedley II has to deal with a second wife who is pregnant, and does not want to bring a black child into the world because of the inherent hardships of being black in America. I am not including this play in my study because it has not been published as of this writing. I do, however, intend to include this play in future examinations of Wilson's history plays.

Wilson's Influences

In order to understand Wilson's connection to African-American culture and history, we need to comprehend the formative influences on his technique and cultural beliefs. Wilson has been heavily influenced by what he calls his "four Bs": playwright Amiri Baraka, collage artist Romare Bearden, Argentinean fabulist Jorge Luis Borges, and, most importantly, the Blues (Wilson, 13 Nov. 1998).

Baraka, born LeRoy (changed to LeRoi in 1952) Jones on October 7, 1934, was a militant leader of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. Baraka's best known plays include Dutchman (1964), The Slave (1962) and Slave Ship (1969). Baraka's influence on Wilson has more to do with the nationalist ideas he espoused in the 1960s, rather than his actual writings ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview

with August Wilson" 554). Wilson admired Baraka's "Black Power" ideology and considers himself to be a Black Nationalist (Elkins 6). Black Nationalist ideology calls for African Americans to be autonomous, owning their own businesses within the American capitalist structure, and aware of how politics impact social standing (Stein 19). According to Marcus Garvey scholar Judith Stein, "Nationalist ideology […] demanded 'a square deal or failing that, a separate political existence.'" In the 1920s, Nationalists, notably Garvey and Cyril Briggs, advocated for separate black states within the United States of America, and separate black countries outside of the America. Racial pride is also a mandatory component of Black Nationalism; a by-product of this is engaging in revolutionary resistance to racial discrimination (19).

In Wilson's plays, black rage sometimes fuels the fire that drives his characters' nationalism, which is most clearly seen with Sterling from Two Trains Running. Some of his characters are Black Nationalists, although less aggressively. Loomis from Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Boy Willie in The Piano Lesson, Troy from Fences, and Hedley in Seven Guitars all espouse tenets of Black Nationalism, such as opposition to racial oppression and promotion of racial pride. Wilson writes to bolster the racial pride of African Americans, as well as provide a blueprint for defiantly dealing with racism. Also, Wilson's call for an African-American theater reflects his Black Nationalist beliefs.

Bearden (1912-1988) was a distinguished African-American collage artist known for his depiction of African-American life. As Wilson was struggling with the writing of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, it was Bearden who clarified Wilson's mission, showing him how he could accomplish his goals. In her essay, "The B^b Burden: The Invisibility of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Eileen Crawford writes:

> He [Wilson] completed 20 pages of the project [Ma] and then dropped it. It took a 1978 exhibition of the art of Romare Bearden to enable Wilson to have, like Bearden, "a clear vision of life's compositions, to provide a vision of life in cultural, ritual and sacred terms" […] Wilson took up his early project, revitalized by his awareness of the complexity of Bearden (Elkins 32).

Bearden's example enabled Wilson to focus on an entire people. Instead of writing a specific play about Ma Rainey, after Bearden's exhibit, Wilson wrote a metaphorical play that used Ma Rainey's story to describe a larger theme—racial oppression—that affects various members of the African-American community. Furthermore, Joe Turner's Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson were each inspired by Bearden collages (Elkins 10). Not only did Bearden influence Wilson on subject matter, but he also took the name—The Piano Lesson—from a Bearden collage that depicted a mother and daughter at a piano. Joe Turner's Come and Gone was inspired by a Bearden work called "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket," a collage that led to the creation of the Loomis character (11-12). As a whole, the cycle plays are like a collage, composed of a number of fragments. In all of Wilson's plays, the main characters riff on a certain American injustice that they have endured. Author Albert Murray defines a riff as "a brief musical phrase that is repeated, sometimes with very subtle variations" (Caponi 98). Each riff can be thought of as a piece of the larger cultural collage that Wilson is fashioning; the riffs may not be of the same material, but they all fit together to tell a larger story about rage, redemption and/or race.

Borges (1899-1986) influenced the way that Wilson tells his stories ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson" 554). From the fabulist, Wilson learned about the importance of listening to his characters, as well as the importance of storytelling, a hallmark of his style (Elkins 12-13). As Wilson told interviewer Mark William Rocha, "It's the *way* Borges tells a story. In Borges, it's

not what happens, but *how*. A lot of times, he'll tell you what's going to happen up front, […] All of the interest is in how the story is going to be told" ("A Conversation with August Wilson 31). This storytelling style is most clearly evidenced in Seven Guitars, in which a murder happens up front; the play is then about how and why the protagonist was murdered. Because the reader has to pay attention to how Borges is telling a story, listening is paramount. Wilson embraces this technique for two reasons: one, he recognizes how important listening is. Two, this "listening break" allows the reader time to think about what is happening and why. Wilson continues to tell Rocha, "With Borges you've got all these wires carrying electrical impulses, but they don't all connect up. When you encounter one of those little breaks, I think he wants you to stop" (31). Once the reader has stopped, this is his/her time to listen to what the characters are doing and saying, to try to put those wires together. Though Borges influenced Wilson's listening and storytelling once he was an adult, originally Wilson learned this skill from the old black men he watched in the barbershops, pool halls, and juke joints. This ability to capture the story of African Americans, their poetry and music, is what first caught Lloyd Richards's attention, as Wilson's characters reminded him of the old black men he used to work with as a child (Migler 114). In addition to listening and storytelling, Borges and Wilson share another similarity: Borges often sends his characters on a quest to locate or lose a text, while Wilson places his characters on a road and pushes them to find their identity (Elkins 13). With most Wilson plays, it is more about the journey than the results. Wilson's plays, as with most plays, are left open-ended because what the character learns on the road is what will help him/her find fulfillment.

Of Wilson's "four Bs," the Blues is his primary influence ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson" 554). Whenever he wants to know anything about the black experience, Wilson goes to the blues, because it is the "book" of black people (Elkins 9). And as he writes a play, he listens to the (usually blues) music of a particular period and lets the music explain what happened to the African Americans of that period; as the characters begin to talk to him, he listens and writes down what they say (Moyers 168). Wilson believes that the song of the blues is the African American's response to the world and encompasses most, if not all, black experiences in America. In his plays, "the blues is *the* […] language for telling and confronting the tragic reality of an America that is […] absent" (10). Not coincidentally, the goal of the blues ("telling and confronting the tragic reality of" America) is also Wilson's goal for his cycle plays.

In each of the plays examined in this study, a character's song, and how he/she treats his/her song, is critical to the character's development and identity. Alan Nadel, editor of May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson, states, "Since the song, as Wilson represents it, is one of the sites of black American history, […the song is…] the source of […African Americans'…] claim to human rights" (101). Characters either find their song, literally or figuratively, at the end of the play (Joe Turner's Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson, Fences, Two Trains Running), or they do not, with devastating results, usually murder (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Seven Guitars). When a character vigorously disregards his/her song, or is disoriented by it, Wilson's message becomes an admonishing one—do not be like these characters. If a character has forgotten his/her

song and how to sing it, this means that the character does not know who he/she is. In Wilson's plays, the song is usually bluesy.

This use of the blues, while present in all of Wilson's works, is most prevalent in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Levee never finds his song because he rejects his musical identity—the blues. This is in stark contrast to the other musicians, including Ma Rainey, who recognize that the blues is one way of coping with racial oppression. In other words, the blues can help temper the negative expression of black rage. Rejecting the blues, Wilson suggests, is akin to rejecting black identity, which never leads to a beneficial outcome for African Americans, as history supports.

The Use of History in Wilson's Writing

The idea of writing this cycle of plays occurred to Wilson after he wrote Jitney (1979), originally set in 1971, and Fullerton Street (1980), set in 1941 ("Staging the Black Experience" F11). Both were rooted in the African-American history of each play's respective decade. Wilson decided to extend the two plays (eventually replacing Fullerton Street with Seven Guitars) into an entire cycle of plays:

> It is not surprising [...] that [...] I would become involved in the idea of history by proposing to write a play that dealt with black life and manners for each decade of the 20th Century. [...] The idea of writing a series of plays that could be laid end on end to comprise a dramatic tracing of the black American odyssey through the 20th century was intriguing. I suddenly found myself with a focus and purpose, which [...] empowered me as well ("Characters Behind History Teach Wilson About Plays" H5).

History is important to Wilson, because he believes that one of African Americans' biggest mistakes has been not embracing its ancestors, as empowerment comes from the past ("Staging the Black Experience" F11). "'Let's look at this [history] again,'" Wilson has told interviewer Kim Powers, "'and see where we've come from and how

we've gotten where we are now.' I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed in the future" (52). This theme of empowerment from the past and the past deciding one's future is seen in all of the cycle plays.

Although Wilson acknowledges the significance of history in his cycle of plays, he does not allow the historical record to dictate his creative process. In his essay, "August Wilson and the Four B's: Influences," Mark William Rocha writes, "Wilson's obsession with the past is less that of a historian than of a Borgesean trickster who both delights and despairs in the knowledge that the past is a life-long process of (re)invention" (Elkins 14). Wilson explains to interviewer Bill Moyers why he enjoys the benefit of historical perspective and this reinvention of the past:

> You can look back to a character [Boy Willie in The Piano Lesson] in 1936, for instance, and you can see him going down a particular path that you know did not work out for that character. Part of what I'm trying to do is to see some of the choices that we as blacks in America have made. Maybe we have made some incorrect choices. By writing that, you can illuminate the choices (167).

It has been said that those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. Wilson, with his ten-play look back into the past, hopes that present-day African Americans are able to avoid the pitfall of repeating their history by observing his plays and understanding their own individual histories-in-the-making. Wilson, through his characters and the choices he has them make, illustrates how a person's actions in 1957 might influence the choices a different person will make in 1969. Wilson's ultimate goal is to show a way for present day African Americans to navigate the inherent obstacles of being Africans in America. In general, Wilson sets his plays in the past in order to make the present its own proscription against what contemporary African Americans should not be doing (Grant 103). Thus, Wilson

sometimes uses his plays to tell his African-American audience what not to do; he wants his audience to learn from his characters' examples. While this is most obvious when observing Levee in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Troy in Fences can certainly teach the audience what not to do, specifically as it relates to familial black rage. Each of Wilson's plays, as they facilitate the recounting of African-American history, depicts, in varying degrees, aspects of the following: identity, the past, and music.

Methodology

To assist the analysis of Wilson's plays, I will use Oscar Lee Brownstein's play analysis techniques and Ntozake Shange's theory of music in African-American performance. My goal with this project is to understand how Wilson uses his plays, through structure and character development, to recuperate black rage. Brownstein's theories facilitate this because, although he focuses on play structure, he never strays from character development, an integral part of play structure. I chose Brownstein's play analysis theories also because he maintains that spectators/readers insist that the world of the play be analogous to the real world, thus they need the play to say something that will affect their lives; this is Wilson's goal as well.

Building on Wilson and Brownstein's correlation, I argue that Wilson's theater can be used as life lessons. Following this train of thought, with this project, I presume a mimetic relationship between real life and theater. While I do not equate the real (reality) with realism, I, as does Wilson, acknowledge the potential connection between the two. Though Wilson inserts non-realistic elements in some of his plays, for the most part his plays are firmly rooted in realism. This use of realism facilitates Wilson's goal, which is to present his works as ground plans for

contemporary African Americans. By embracing realism, Wilson eases the connection between his characters, their stories, his audience, and their stories. As a result of this association, hopefully Wilson's present-day audience will emulate and/or learn from his characters' triumphs and tragedies.

In five of the six plays I examine, music (and dance) is intricately connected to the expression, activation, or release of rage. I originally gravitated towards Shange, as a musical theorist, because of the way she uses music in her choreopoem (a theatrical piece that uses poetry and music/dance), For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf. I presumed that her musical theory would provide some insight into how Wilson uses music. This was a correct assumption, even though I acknowledge Shange's work is very different from Wilson's. Music and play analysis will allow me to deconstruct Wilson's plays.

Brownstein's play analysis techniques, found in his book Strategies of Drama: The Experience of Form, helped me to understand how Wilson uses play structure to construct the trajectory of black rage and lead his audience to his message. Brownstein's structural analysis reads the clues the playwright has sown and determines how they foreshadow what is to come. His basic theory involves "plants" and "perception shifts." A plant is a seed, a clue, a trait about a character, a location, which later blooms into something significant. A perception shift is an occurrence—in dialogue or image—that changes my frame of reference (Brownstein 6). A climactic plant is a plant that is intricately rooted in the perception shift, climax or both. Plants are set within the play and eventually blossom once the perception shift is realized. Plants are building blocks towards a perception shift. For example, in Joe Turner's Come and Gone, the town of Rankin is a plant. At the end of the play, it is

revealed that Loomis's wife, who is crucial to his transformation—which is also the play's perception shift—is living in Rankin. Though characters discuss Rankin early in the play, its significance becomes crucial at the end of the play.

In order to produce a potent perception shift, it is necessary for a playwright to create "a sense that all this [action in the play] is leading to *something* of great interest and value to us [the reader/audience], even though we are not sure what that something will be" (48; emphasis added). Levee's revelation about his childhood racial traumas in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is an example of this because it foreshadows his actions at the end of the play, which affect an entire community (17). The perception shift can surprise me, but I should be able to track back through the play and understand why the shift occurred. Perception shifts do not have to come at the end of the play, although the play's major shift (the climactic perception shift) usually does.

Music plays a strong role in all of Wilson's works; it is directly connected to the exhibition of black rage in five of the plays. In order to analyze this key element of his cycle plays, I will use Shange's theory that music is critical to African-American performance. "The reason that so many [African-American] plays written to silence & stasis fail," she writes, "is cuz most black people have some music & movement in our lives. we do sing & dance. this is a cultural reality" (x). In African-American performance, music serves as a character, but more importantly, as a spiritual link to the ancestors. Music is important in African-American performance because it is such a part of African and African-American life ("cultural reality"). From beating out messages on a drum to the coded Negro spirituals to the use of rap as a contemporary battle cry, music has always told of African Americans' position

within American society. This life ideology, not surprisingly, transfers to the performance stage as well. Thus, Shange argues that if African-American artists want to soar, they must ignore the notion that seriousness equates only using words. Most of Wilson's characters (as well as some of his audience members) are searching for their unique, individual songs, songs that have been suppressed or repressed because of their placement in American society. Once Wilson's characters find their respective songs, this is usually accompanied by self-discovery as well. The discovery of the song allows the character the ability to move on (frequently in a forward direction) with their lives. Realizing the significance of one's song, self-discovery, and moving on are all a result of music's centrality to African-American life, and as a by-product, an influential component of Wilson's body of work. This is Wilson's goal with his cycle of plays—to help African Americans learn and observe themselves, and move onto positive futures, all motivated through the expression of black rage.

Chapter 1: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1911)*

Introduction

Wilson read author Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man when he was fourteen, and it influenced him years later when he began writing plays ("How to Write A Play Like August Wilson" H5). In this text, Invisible Man is a representation of the black man who does not know who he is. Like the Invisible Man, the protagonist in novelist Richard Wright's Native Son—Bigger Thomas—also serves as an archetypal influence for Wilson. Bigger Thomas is a depiction of the black man whose rage has led to his downfall. Wilson uses his protagonist (Loomis) in Joe Turner's Come and Gone, set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1911, to clarify the connection between oppression, self-image, and black rage. According to African-American theater scholar Paul Carter Harrison, by creating the Loomis character, Wilson is "placing a face on the Invisible Man while refiguring the turbulent angst of Bigger Thomas into gestures of liberation" ("August Wilson's Blues Poetics" 299). Like the Invisible Man, Loomis faces issues of identification because of his recent imprisonment via forced labor. This bondage is similar to Loomis's slave ancestors' captivity.

For Africans in America, one major legacy of slavery and emancipation was the loss of identity. During slavery, slaves did not possess any individuality; they were simply the master's property. After emancipation, the slaves were free, but they did not know who or what they were. What did it mean to be free? Wilson answers this question using Loomis's story. How is Loomis's identity impacted once his confinement is over? Wilson is able to use Loomis, and the largest metaphor in the play—the search/journey for self—to personify the ethereal Invisible Man. Wilson

also uses Loomis to show that rage does not have to lead to tragic events, as with Bigger Thomas, but instead can be triumphant.

How is black rage used to determine and elucidate identity? Black rage is literally used to propel and lead a character to uncover his suppressed self. In Wilson's plays, black rage is often linked to oppression, suppression, and/or repression. Though phonetically similar, oppression, suppression, and repression mean different things. To repress is to hold back, and constrain. To suppress means to keep something from being revealed, to hide it. To oppress someone is to burden them harshly, unjustly or tyrannically. Loomis's identification is self-suppressed, but the character is oppressed by American society. Loomis's story shows me how he has been and will be impacted by persecution, fury, and not knowing who he truly is. I will indicate how oppression created Loomis's black rage, which literally fuels his trek up North, where he discovers his true image as an African in America. Though Wilson demonstrates how the suppression of one's song can result from rage, he also uses Loomis to show how black rage can be used as a motivating force, leading to self-awareness. Thus, Loomis's rage is positive because if it were not triggered by his coerced drudgery, he would have never realized his connection to Africa. Loomis will use his rage to advance toward accepting his slave ancestors and, within his own shining light, discover himself to be a leader for his people.

In discussing why he wrote Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Wilson states:

> "Joe Turner" was born from a painting […] in a magazine. […] It was a boardinghouse scene, and I began to wonder who one of the figures was, a man […] in this posture that I call *abject defeat*. He eventually became the character [and protagonist] Herald Loomis. […] the song called "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" […] and the painting […] fueled what I wanted to say about the separation and dispersal of blacks ("Staging the Black Experience" F11; emphasis added).

Wilson's use of the terms "abject defeat" and "separation and dispersal of blacks" both connect to the suppression of self present in the play, in that it takes a broken and displaced man to repress who he is. Though slavery, both literal and metaphorical, is a major catalyst for the action in this play, according to theater critic Clive Barnes, "Wilson's play is not about slavery. It is about the results of slavery; it is about separation. Separation from roots, separation from kith and kin, *separation within one's own psychic self*" ("O'Neill in Blackface" 320; emphasis added). Loomis does not know himself, thus he is divided until the end of the play, when he becomes a whole man. Slavery is a representative example of the oppression black men and women face in American society, resulting in the destruction of their self-image, and repression of their connection to their ancestors.

Wilson shows his audience that African Americans are intricately connected to Africa, thus in some ways the play is about reunion ("New Life on Broadway" 518), and in other ways it is about disconnection ("O'Neill in Blackface" 320). Characters are separated from their "Africanness" and then reunited with it, resulting in a hero (Loomis) who will "show the way" to Blacks (Elkins 138). This champion should also show the way to Wilson's audience, heralding Wilson's message that African Americans need to know who they are and accept their African historical identity and connections, whether they are painful or not (Herrington 85). Specifically for his contemporary African-American audience, Wilson demonstrates through his characters that an African American can not truly realize who s/he is until s/he accepts her/his African roots (Savran 296). This is especially accurate if the African American in question is experiencing black rage (Plum 565).

Much like his characters, Wilson straddles America and Africa as he writes his plays. In her thesis, "'Joe Turner's Come and Gone': an African Odyssey," Nefertiti C. Burton argues that:

> Wilson structures his dramas along the lines of the well-made play, slowly building conflict to a crisis that hinges on the disclosure of a traumatic incident from the protagonist's past. […] What makes [Joe Turner's Come and Gone] so unique is the fact that Wilson also incorporates […] an African modality--the interplay of the spiritual with the material world (Burton 6).

Wilson confirms Burton's argument in an interview with David Savran, stating that, though Joe Turner's Come and Gone uses the well-made play structure, the play also includes an African aesthetic, which allows spirits to interact with the physical world, enabling characters to discover themselves (289). Wilson told Savran:

> I hope that my art serves the masses of blacks in America who are in desperate need of a solid and sure *identity*. I hope my plays make people understand that these [characters] are African people, that this is why they do what they do. If blacks recognize the value in that, then we will be on our way to claiming our identity and participating in society as Africans (Savran 304; emphasis added).

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, the first play in Wilson's cycle of history plays, is the play that presents the strongest connection between America and Africa (Burton 6). Wilson deliberately sets the play close to the turn of the century in order to highlight the connection between Africa and America, including African retentions and the still-present aftermath of slavery, the Civil War, and Emancipation (Powers 53; Herrington 80; Winer 323; "O'Neill in Blackface" 320). Wilson uses Joe Turner's Come and Gone to encourage 21st century African Americans to call on their ancestors in order to tap into their power base, which would help African Americans stand on their own two feet in contemporary American society.

Wilson sets Joe Turner's Come and Gone in a boardinghouse in August 1911 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to facilitate the presentation of various types of black people; the one thing all of the boarders have in common is that they are searching for something, oftentimes their own identities, in an oppressive American society ("Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's Joe Turner" 318; "Second Thoughts on First Nights" 319). Thus these transient characters are archetypal characters representing all Blacks in America who do not, have not, can not "come through" Wilson's boardinghouse (Pereira 63). Wilson contends that his black characters are isolated, "cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the [African] gods and only guessing at their faces" (Joe Turner's Come and Gone xvii). Wilson shows how African Americans can use their black rage to reclaim their African recollection. In addition to finding their memory, as with most of the characters in Wilson's plays, these characters are trying to find their worth in American society.

Synopsis

Joe Turner's Come and Gone begins on a Saturday morning in August 1911 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the play will end two weeks later. As the lights come up, fifty-something-year-old boardinghouse owner Seth Holly and his wife, Bertha, five years younger, are in their kitchen. Bertha, who manages the boardinghouse, prepares breakfast, while Seth watches sixty-something-year-old Bynum, a boarder who is known to the other characters to be a root worker/conjure man. Root workers and conjure men, also known as medicine men, have the ability to tap into the force of spirits (Mbiti 16). This is an ability that will allow Bynum to help various characters throughout the course of the play. Seth and Bertha discuss Bynum and a

twenty-five-year-old boarder named Jeremy. Bertha engages in the role she has played for the past twenty-five years as Seth's wife—that of sympathizer. In addition to owning the boardinghouse, Seth works two other jobs, one of which is making pots and pans.

As Seth and Bertha continue their conversation, Bynum enters and joins the conversation, which eventually leads to the three discussing the outcome of emancipation. As if on cue, the only white character in the play, Selig, enters. Selig, a thin man with greasy hair, is approximately the same age as Seth. Though the two men appear to be friends, their relationship is mostly business—Selig buys Seth's metalwork and sells it throughout the community. Besides being a salesman, Selig is a self-proclaimed People Finder—for one dollar, Selig helps black people find their long-lost relatives, scattered throughout the North in a post-slavery landscape. Selig comes from a long line of black people finders—his father was a slave hunter, while his great-grandfather brought slaves to America.

After Seth and Selig conduct business, Bynum asks Selig if he has found his "shiny man." In his article, "Saying Goodbye to the Past: Self-Empowerment and History in Joe Turner's Come and Gone," Douglas Anderson defines the shiny man as:

> an ordinary man who, possessing his song [read: identity] as "a voice inside him telling him which way to go," is able to guide others toward repossession of their songs, toward becoming shiny men in their own right […] And since "that shine could pass on to anybody," the shiny man is also the individual who has not yet found his song, one who searches for himself. That search takes place in the world (449).

Though seemingly contradictory (a shiny man "possesses his song" and "has not yet found his song"), the first part of the quote refers to a known shiny man, while the

last part of the quote refers to a shiny man who has not realized his calling yet. This pre-shiny man may not know who he is as he searches for himself, and is thus not an established shiny man. When Selig asks for the man's name, Bynum says he does not know the shiny man's name, but Bynum calls him John, because Bynum met him around Johnstown. This is the play's first plant.

Bynum then tells the story of how he and his shiny man met and how the man told Bynum to follow him so he could show Bynum the Secret of Life. At a bend in the road, the man rubbed his hands on Bynum's, causing blood to appear. The man told Bynum to rub the blood on himself, as a way of cleansing himself. The two men went around the bend and suddenly the world, according to Bynum, got really big. It was at this moment when the man began to shine, and he eventually disappeared. Bynum thought he was by himself, but when he looked up, he saw his deceased father. Bynum's father told Bynum that it saddened him that Bynum did not have his own song, and he was going to help Bynum find his song. Bynum's father accomplished this by taking Bynum to the ocean, where Bynum saw something he could not explain. This is the second plant, which will become significant at the end of Act One. Bynum's father also told him that the shiny man was the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. This is the play's third plant, because Loomis will eventually leave the Holly boardinghouse and show the way to other lost Blacks. Bynum was told that if he ever saw another shiny man, he would know that his song had been accepted and was realized to its fullest potential; this would allow Bynum to die a happy man. Bynum then returned to the bend in the road, only this time he had his song—the Binding Song. Bynum chose this song because he had seen so many

black people during post-slavery walking away and leaving each other behind. Now Bynum's "Binding Song" could bind them back together.

When Bynum finishes his story, Selig leaves and Jeremy enters. Jeremy will eventually become involved with two female boarders, who are about the same age, twenty-six-year-old Mattie Campbell, who is desperately searching for a future, and Molly Cunningham; Jeremy will eventually leave the Holly boardinghouse with the aggressive Molly, while Mattie's future is bound to another character. Once Jeremy enters, he announces that he was arrested and fined for doing nothing.

Jeremy is not the only person to suffer false imprisonment in this play; the next character to enter—protagonist Herald Loomis—also suffered the same fate ten years earlier. Loomis, who is thirty-two, tall, and solidly built, enters with his eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia. Loomis is literally and figuratively a dark presence, with wild hair and bulging eyes. Loomis is looking for a room, which Seth begrudgingly offers him; in the larger picture, Loomis is looking for his wife, Martha. Though there are conflicts in the play (e.g., between Seth and Loomis and the triangle between Jeremy, Mattie, and Molly), the major conflict in the play is an internal one that resides within Loomis. Bynum tells Loomis about Selig and his people-finding abilities. Once Loomis and Bynum meet, Bynum is all about prompting Selig to find Martha. When Selig returns, Loomis pays him to find Martha. According to Burton, what Loomis is really looking for is his identity; Joe Turner's Come and Gone is "a ritual drama where the protagonist's spiritual confrontation with his identity is ritualized and theatricalized concretely on stage. […] operating on a metaphysical" level. (7). The first round of this on-going "spiritual confrontation" is realized by the end of Act One, as Loomis appears to be possessed and has a vision.

At the end of Act One, the residents, except Loomis, sit down to a Sunday dinner. Seth suggests that the residents do a Juba, a ritual dance that involves drumming and singing; the goal of the Juba is to invite the presence of ancestral spirits (Nobles 116). The Juba is defined as a species of dance that often included the reenactment of a mental breakdown (Bogumil 466). The Juba is heavily influenced by African circular dance ceremonies, called the ring shout—the dancing and singing are directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of movement. In the middle of the Juba, as the residents are calling on the Holy Ghost, a third of the Trinity crucial to Christianity, a raging Loomis enters and demands that they stop the dance. Loomis denigrates the Holy Ghost and the boarders' "Africanness", alludes to racial and sexual stereotypes, speaks in tongues (as if he were possessed), and dances around the kitchen. Loomis then tells the crowd that he has seen things he could not explain, just as Bynum saw things he could not explain when he was shown the Secret of Life. Loomis tries to exit, but instead is thrown back and terrified by a vision. Loomis and Bynum then engage in a call and response re-telling of the vision they both saw—a vision that had bones rising out of the water, becoming "flesh covering the bones" of black people washed up on American soil. At first the black people just lay on the land, then they begin to breathe, and then they stand. Loomis, however, cannot stand—he is not ready yet (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 53). This vision is the play's climactic plant. The black people in Bynum and Loomis's visions are slaves from the Middle Passage. By the end of the play, Loomis will have a kinship with these Africans; he will become one with them, and be able to stand.

Act Two opens the next day. Seth tells Loomis he has to leave the boardinghouse, after his outburst. Loomis reminds Seth that he is paid up through the week, so he is not going anywhere. While Seth and Bynum play dominoes, Bynum sings a song about Joe Turner, a fictional white man who imprisoned black men. Wilson uses Joe Turner as a symbolic representation of white American oppression. Though there was no real Joe Turner, there was a real Joe Turney, who was the brother of Tennessee governor Peter Turney. Joe Turney's political connection will color Wilson's depiction of the Joe Turner/Loomis relationship. Loomis demands that Bynum stop singing about Joe Turner. Bynum looks at Loomis and makes a proclamation about him: Loomis has forgotten his song and how to sing it. Bynum also tells Loomis that he now knows Joe Turner enslaved Loomis, which led to Loomis suppressing his song. Loomis then recounts to Seth and Bynum how Joe Turner imprisoned him for seven years, effectively ruining his life.

Joe Turner had caught Loomis in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1901, as Loomis was trying to stop some black men from gambling. Once Loomis was released seven years later, he retrieved his daughter and commenced searching for his wife. Loomis, which means "light," had been the deacon of the "Abundant Life" church. The abundant light within Loomis was turned into an opaque, defeated darkness, where all light is extinguished, at the hands of Joe Turner ("Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's 'Joe Turner'" 319). Bynum tells Loomis that Joe Turner wanted his song; this is why Loomis suppressed it, to avoid giving it to Turner. Unfortunately, Loomis hid it so well that he now no longer knows where it is.

Saturday—the day Seth intends to throw Loomis out of his house—arrives. Loomis and Zonia leave. After they leave, Loomis's twenty-eight-year-old wife,

Martha, and Selig enter. From the moment Loomis and Selig had met, Bynum subtly told Selig to go to Rankin, which is where Martha was (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 42). Bynum's hints to Selig are Wilson's plants to the reader. By motivating Selig to find Martha, Bynum facilitates Loomis's discovery that his identity is not linked to Martha, but rather to his African family. Martha is as rooted in Christianity as Bynum is rooted in Africa. Loomis and Zonia re-enter, and Martha explains that she thought Loomis was dead. In order to avoid racist attacks, she went up north with her church. Loomis then hands Zonia over to Martha, because Zonia needs to learn about being a woman now. Loomis accuses Bynum of binding him to the road, declares he is not going to be bound up anymore, and pulls out a knife. Bynum then reveals that Zonia was bound to Martha, so they would be able to find each other again one day, so Loomis could begin his real work. Bynum tells Loomis he is bound to his song. All he has to do is stand up and sing it. Martha, believing the devil has taken hold of Loomis, begins to pray for him, telling him he has to be washed in the blood of the lamb. Loomis tells Martha he can bleed for himself and slashes himself across the chest, rubs blood across his face, and comes to a realization. Loomis realizes that he is standing. This is the play's perception shift. He has found his song—the song of self-sufficiency—and he has released the black rage that led him to the Holly boardinghouse. In its place is a black rage that will activate Loomis, showing Blacks "The Way." Loomis tells Martha good-bye, and leaves, followed by Mattie, who suddenly realizes she has found her future in Loomis. As Loomis leaves, Bynum acknowledges that Loomis is his shiny man.

Rage Triggers Revolutionary Discovery

Bynum attempts to bind Loomis to his African identity and his ancestors in two ways, both of which trigger Loomis's rage: first, using the Juba. Bynum's second way of binding Loomis to his ancestors is by singing about Joe Turner. Loomis again responds with rage. Initially, Loomis's rage results from him not knowing his history. Joe Turner did not take away Loomis's history; Loomis just did not know it—until he encountered Bynum. In order for Loomis to know where he is going, he has to acknowledge his past. Bynum gets Loomis to do this when he sings about Joe Turner. In response to Bynum's song, Loomis delivers a monologue that tells the audience (and reiterates to himself) where he has come from, and to whom he is connected. Loomis does not recognize at this point that he is housing an internal battle over his identity, with Martha on one side and his ancestors and Bynum on the other. While Loomis is at the Holly boardinghouse, waiting for Selig, and some word from Martha, his relationship with Bynum becomes significant. Bynum first takes an interest in Loomis because Loomis looks like Bynum's Johnstown shiny man. In the article "The Walking Blues: An Anthropological Approach to the Theater of August Wilson," Alice Mills acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between Bynum and Loomis and maintains: "On the brink of insanity, Loomis is saved because he listened to Bynum" (32). Loomis is able to leave the Holly boardinghouse at the end of the play and face White America because Bynum was successful in assisting Loomis in discovering his true identity as an African. In Loomis's last burst of rage, when he slashes himself, he realizes that he has to stand on his own two feet, supported by his ancestors. This is Loomis's revolutionary discovery. Thus, motivated by Bynum, the

Juba and a song about Joe Turner lead Loomis to locate himself and his connection to his ancestors.

Bynum subtly challenges Loomis about who he thinks he is, beginning with the Juba. Towards the end of Act One, the following dialogue leads into the Juba:

> SETH: Come on, we gonna Juba.
>
> BYNUM: You know me, I'm always ready to Juba [….]
>
> SETH: You said it! Come on, Bertha, leave them dishes be for a while. We gonna Juba.
>
> BYNUM: Alright. Let's Juba down! […]
>
> (*[Bynum] calls the dance as others clap hands, shuffle and stomp around the table*) (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 51-52).

The Juba actually begins when Bynum gives the "word." He calls the dance because he is the character most connected to Africa and Yoruban culture, both of which are heavily linked to the Juba.

In the Yoruba language, "juba" is a verb that means to pay homage to (Nobles 114). Mary L. Bogumil, in her article, "'Tomorrow Never Comes': Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone," explains what the Juba means to the characters in the play: "The juba signifies the recurrence (in memories, in deeds, and in visions) of remote ancestral ties—a […] cultural legacy from the characters' African […ancestors]" (465). The ring in which Africans danced and sang, the ancestral tie, and "cultural legacy" are all keys to understanding the means by which the boardinghouse residents achieved oneness in America (Anderson 452; Pereira 75). These Africans in America achieved unity with the help of the Juba/ring because the Juba connected them to Africa while they were in America ("August Wilson's Blues Poetics" 312). Critic Frank Rich clarifies the significance of the Juba,

including its link between Africa and America: "The boarding house's residents, the lost Loomis excepted, erupt in a juba that simultaneously expresses their African heritage and their hunger for freedom [in America]" ("'Joe Turner' at Yale Rep" C17). After and during the Juba, one should recognize that these boardinghouse residents are divided, split in two, and looking for *something*.

The characters are bisected as they try to navigate religion and their own pasts. The characters are trying to connect with their African ancestors, as well as an American Christian God, as evidenced by the characters calling on the Holy Ghost (Hayes 202). Referring to these dual connections, Wilson scholar Kim Pereira determines:

> Their road to self-fulfillment begins by reconnecting themselves with their past through music and rituals. This reunion provides them with a proper perspective of their tumultuous history, as they discover their true origins not in the plantations of slavery but in the rich and varied cultures of Africa […] They discover their real identities to be African, not Christian, though this "African-ness" is transfigured with multiple images drawn from a Christianity in which they may find truth and affirmation of their deepest beliefs (83).

The characters are searching in their collective past for their identity; what they find is rooted in the past—in music and dance from Africa—as well as the present—American Christianity. The characters achieve a oneness, a unity that is two-fold: one, the characters are engaging with each other at the same time in the midst of this ritualistic event (Hayes 201; "Panoramic History of Blacks in America in Wilson's Joe Turner" 318). Two, within the Juba, the characters are able to straddle their own dualities—the fact that they are Africans in America. In other words, the Juba allows the characters to engage in both of their worlds—the "Americanness" symbolized through the Holy Ghost, and the "Africanness" represented by the singing, dancing and circularity of the Juba (The Theatre of Black Americans 27). In the midst of this

bonding, partially with Mother Africa, Loomis's rage is triggered, which Bynum suspected would happen.

The Juba triggers Loomis's rage for a number of reasons: one, the Juba presents an alternative to Loomis's "Martha is my identity" argument by showing how the Juba represents that the past is present. The Juba suggests to Loomis that his identity is connected to his ancestors. His resistance to the ancestors triggers his rage. Two, the Juba represents the two conflicting spiritual aspects of his life—his former Christianity (when he was a Deacon) and his more recent African Traditional Religion. ATRs are religions Africans partook in before their conversion to Christianity; Bynum's root doctoring is one example. The vision Loomis has when attempting to leave the Holly boardinghouse is another.

African-American theater scholar Paul Carter Harrison describes the Juba dance and its relation to Loomis:

> Herald Loomis […] is drawn […] by a frenzied, improvised […] ritual call of the Holy Ghost, which was generated in the remnants of a ring shout retrieved from African memory and now configured as the Juba dance. Loomis […] who seeks salvation without submission to powers larger than his own, challenges the authority of the Holy Ghost ("August Wilson's Blues Poetics" 311-312).

In light of Loomis's resistance to submit to a higher power, it is not surprising that Loomis cannot be a part of the Juba (Bogumil 467). Loomis is out of rhythm and harmony with other human beings; it makes sense that he would not be able to partake in an activity that brings the characters together. Bogumil explains Loomis's resistance to group activities:

> Perhaps what disturbs Herald Loomis about the characters' participation in the dance is that sense of community, of solidarity, of an atavistic legacy of Africa, but sadly also of the bondage still in the consciousness of the post-Civil War generation—all of which are in sharp contrast to his desire for

> autonomy. Why do they laud it over him? Why do they wish to be reminded of their cultural past? […] Is not the juba a connection to that unwanted past or tradition? (467).

At this point, the end of Act One, Loomis does not know his own identity; he certainly cannot be part of a group celebrating duality, even though he himself is a man split in two (Herrington 90). Bogumil continues:

> Herald Loomis, a member of the post-Civil War generation, attempts to *sever* that *native African connection* to the earth and to *break free* from that past American connection to Joe Turner enslavement in order to become Americanized in post-Emancipation Proclamation America. Surrounded by what he perceives as a conspiratorial group [the other boarders], Loomis even degrades his own ancestry with his vociferous attack against the religiomagical elements of his African American ethnicity, including physical and sexual stereotypes, to further his insult upon others present (Bogumil 469; emphasis added).

Though the characters are calling on a Christian Holy Ghost, they are encasing their Christian call in an African context; thus African spirits come into the Holly boardinghouse as well, and start Loomis on his journey. In an interview with Kim Powers, Wilson explains Loomis's vision and how it connects to his identity:

> [Loomis] is witness to bones rising up out of the ocean, taking on flesh and walking up on the land. This is his connection with the ancestors, the Africans who were lost during the Middle Passage and were thrown overboard. He is privileged to witness this because he *needs most to know who he is*. It [the vision] is telling him, "This is who you are. You are these bones. You are the sons and daughters of these people. They are walking around here now and they look like you because you are these very same people. This is who you are" (54; emphasis added).

These people, Loomis's ancestors, are now spirits; these African spirits enter the Holly boardinghouse because they were called by the characters engaged in the Juba; the spirits stay because Loomis not only disparages Christianity when he interrupts the Juba, but he also denigrates Africa. It is at this moment that the spirits recognize they have to intervene. Once this happens, the Juba has connected the ancestors to

the present, which is its original function. According to Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon, the African spirits use Loomis at this particular moment to be their "spokesperson" because:

> As the symbolic equivalent of black America at the turn of the century, Herald Loomis also reveals the changing place of Christianity in the lives of former slaves and the progeny of slaves. The tension between certain residual African religious ideas and Christian doctrines to which his slave ancestors were exposed by their masters detonates in him an explosion of opposites (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 130).

Thus the setting becomes ripe for a spiritual intervention since the Juba riled up the African and Christian spirits (Pereira 73). It is at this time that Loomis really begins his journey to self-discovery. So, the Juba triggers Loomis's rage, which leads him to his connection with his ancestors, but he is not ready to face them at the end of Act One.

Song + Black Rage + Storytelling=Historical Identity

In Act Two, Bynum continues to push Loomis's buttons, only this time Wilson does not use a dance to inspire rage, he uses a song—Bynum sings about Joe Turner. The mention of Turner's name triggers Loomis's rage, and leads to Bynum openly stating that Loomis does not know who he is. Basically, Bynum tells Loomis all he has to do to solve this is sing his song. Of course, Loomis does not trust in this, as he still believes that all he needs is Martha. Bynum, as he tells a story, subtly tells Loomis that he has to turn to the ancestors if he wants peace. Wilson uses a song to trigger Loomis's rage, which allows Wilson to use storytelling and monologue to get Loomis closer to his ancestors.

Using black rage, monologue, and storytelling, Joe Turner's Come and Gone revives the connection between Africans and African Americans that was lost during

slavery; the connection between African Americans and Africans is synonymous with identity/song. Nadel argues that, for Wilson and African Americans in general, recovering the song becomes a truer form of archives than written European chronicled text, and the song allows Loomis a historical identity as a human being (102). Towards the end of Act Two, scene two, as Bynum is storytelling, he informs Loomis and Seth that when a man forgets his song and goes off in search of it, the song is usually with the man all the time (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 71). This is a plant, which refers to Loomis having his song—the song of self-sufficiency—with him all the time, even when he suppressed it so that Joe Turner would not be able to take it from him (73). Nadel elaborates on how Wilson's use of song connects to Loomis's journey:

> It [Loomis's song] is the authority upon which rests Loomis's claim to human rights. To steal that song is thus to deprive Loomis of the claim and thereby to legitimize the treatment of him as property. At the same time, Loomis's attempt to protect his song, in the way he was unable to protect his body, has forced him to suppress that song […] In denying Joe Turner access to the source of his claim to human rights, he has also had to deprive himself of that access. In consequence, now that Joe Turner has come and gone, Herald Loomis doesn't know whether he is coming or going. The figurative source of his claim to human rights, his song, has turned into a literal search for logistics, the walkin' blues. Hence he searches for his lost wife not to recapture her–which would replicate Joe Turner's enslavement–but rather to recapture the history he lost when he suppressed his song (101-102).

Though Loomis spends most of the play trying to find his place in the world ("searching for logistics") and raging, it is his rage that finally leads him to realize who Herald Loomis is.

Loomis's rage, fired up because of American oppression, is the gas that drove him to the Holly boardinghouse, and fueled his determination, as he looked for Martha; this rage will also support Loomis when he realizes that Martha is not his

starting place. Loomis's encounters with Bynum helps him understand his rage, his connection to his ancestors, and his calling. After Loomis finally sees Martha, and realizes that she is not his salvation, his rage explodes (Marshall 241). It is logical that if Loomis's rage were used to propel him toward Martha, when he recognized this had been a mistake, his rage would seemingly spin out of control. When Martha and Loomis reunite in the Holly boardinghouse, this leads to a reversal for Loomis (Burton 21). Loomis realizes that he can no longer say Martha is his starting place when she is standing right in front of him, and he is still lost. Loomis has reached the end of his journey and believes he has nothing to show for it. As a result, Loomis has to do *something*, he needs to engage in some action to combat this ineffectiveness. When Martha mentions the blood of the lamb, referring to Jesus, Loomis instinctively knows what he must do—he has to show himself and the others that depending on a white savior instead of one's own ancestors or oneself is problematic. The fact that Loomis's most heightened instance of rage involves a ritual sacrifice speaks to the "Africanness" that was always within him, but simply suppressed. Within that moment, when his grief and pain, over not knowing who he is, overtakes him, Loomis's rage and the physical action of slashing himself forces him to realize who he really is. Loomis realizes he can bleed for himself, and he does not need anyone to do it for him. Loomis recognizes that the Christianity he had been following before his imprisonment failed him, thus he falls back on the African Traditional Religions that led him to this point and gives him the strength to stand up. Once Loomis realizes he has to stand on his own two feet (with help from his ancestors), he becomes shiny and moves out into the world to help other lost souls who do not know their songs, their history, or their stories.

Use of Storytelling and Monologue

Wilson uses storytelling and monologue (Bynum's storytelling, Loomis's monologue, and both characters' oral tradition) to recuperate African/African Americans' song/identity. Though Loomis will eventually find his song and connection to his ancestors, he must first tell his story (Nadel 102). Loomis does not reveal his history through written text, but rather through monologue, a type of oral text. Likewise, Bynum conveys his past using storytelling. Though quite similar, storytelling and monologue are distinctive in the following way: storytelling tends to have a beginning, middle, and end, while monologue does not have to be as neatly packaged. In any event, monologue and storytelling are both oral traditions and significant in Wilson's works. Lloyd Richards explains:

> The oral tradition brought from Africa was not only useful but essential to pass on history, custom, and the names, nature and practices of the ancient gods; when the oral tradition was forbidden, song […] or simply deep spirituality became the medium. The stories told in *Joe Turner* allow boarding house residents to simply pass on information, evoke their gods, create a sense of communality (64).

In addition to being significant to Wilson, a reverential regard for the spiritual world and an exceptionally high regard for storytelling are also African traits (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 127). Storytelling and monologue are African and Wilson trademarks. Critic Hap Erstein identifies these trademarks and declares: "A consummate storyteller, he [Wilson] often gives his characters that gift too and has them wander off with tangential monologues that could be likened to blues solos" (E10). Wilson uses storytelling to illustrate Bynum's historical identity. Storytelling is also used to show how Bynum reached back to the past (Africa) to move forward in

America. Bynum intends to help Loomis do the same thing. For example, Bynum tells Loomis:

> Now, I used to travel all up and down this road and that…looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr. Loomis. I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. Something wasn't making my heart smooth and easy. Then one day my daddy gave me a song. That song had a weight to it that was hard to handle. That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. Didn't want to accept that song. I tried to find my daddy to give him back *his* song. But I found out it wasn't his song. It was *my* song. It had come from way deep inside me. *I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song.* […] And that song helped me on the road (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 71; emphasis added).

By telling stories, Bynum was able to illustrate his past self and show that it was oppressive until Bynum connected with Africa ("looked long back in memory") and accepted his identity. Once he was able to do this, Bynum began to carry the enslavement of his ancestors within himself, and this strengthened him because he now knew who he was (Herrington 92).

Responding to Bynum's story, Loomis also uses storytelling to expose his historical identity. In order for Wilson's message—black rage can lead one to uncover their concealed identity—to resonate, it is necessary to understand Loomis's past, including the America in which he lived. It is essential to comprehend what happened to Loomis before the play begins. Not surprisingly, Loomis's history is connected to his black rage and his ancestors. Just as Loomis's progenitors were enslaved, he was also held captive. Because Loomis cannot go back to his African ancestors at this point in the play, his history, rooted in America, rooted in negativity, is packaged within a raging monologue, the subject of which is Joe Turner. One might wonder how Loomis, in 1901, could be captured by Joe Turner, and made a slave, considering this defining moment in Loomis's life occurred almost thirty-six

years after the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, was ratified on December 6, 1865. The answer is convict leasing. It is this convict leasing that triggered Loomis's rage, and caused him to suppress his song from Joe Turner. Though Wilson uses Joe Turner as a metaphorical representation, the real man Joe Turner is based on—Joe Turney—and his connection to government facilitates Wilson's depiction of convict leasing. Since Joe Turner/Turney was the brother of a government official, it would be easy for him to tie Loomis up in a statewide system ("August Wilson's Come to Stay: A Major Writer Illuminates the Black Experience" 82; Daniel 24).

Historically, the American black male at the turn of the century, as Wilson demonstrates, led a life that made it difficult to maintain an identity because of state, country, and judicial constructs like convict leasing. The convict-lease system was devised as a post-Reconstruction socioeconomic advantage for white southern landowners to further exploit black labor ("'Tomorrow Never Comes': Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone" 469). Before Loomis was captured, he was a Deacon at the Abundant Life church; after, he was a slave/prisoner. As was the case with actual convict leasing, when Loomis was seized, he was forced to work Joe Turner's land (Daniel 24-25). Douglas Anderson connects Loomis to convict leasing and his ancestors:

> Before Loomis can claim the legacy of empowerment left him by his ancestors, he must confront and understand his own experience of oppression: seven years of false imprisonment and forced labor on the chain gang of Joe Turner […] Though this experience is part of Loomis's personal past, it is not one that he has suffered alone, but with the men imprisoned with him, those who lived in fear of imprisonment and the families deprived of their men. Loomis's experience, then, is once again part of a collective past, a past preserved for collective memory in a song [of self-sufficiency] (455).

The men Anderson refers to all suffered under convict leasing. When Loomis's black rage causes him to slash himself, go out into the world, and show Blacks the way, the Blacks he will lead are his fellow "convicts." Though Loomis's triumphant exit from the Holly boardinghouse implies he is going to pursue retribution for his ancestors, he is also seeking vindication for his fellow convict leasing survivors—his brothers. Anderson argues that Loomis's experience was part of a collective past of slavery. Though Loomis was not an actual slave, his imprisonment serves as a metaphor for slavery: while Loomis was under Joe Turner's control, he had no authority over his life, no freedoms (Burton 9, 10; "What Black Writers Owe to Music" 7; Anderson 433). A black man could become a white man's property at any moment under convict leasing, a form of pseudo-slavery in the post-Emancipation landscape. It is this lack of autonomy that feed Loomis's rage.

After Bynum sings the song "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," Loomis tells the story of how he was captured:

> Joe Turner catched me when my little girl was just born. Wasn't nothing but a baby sucking on her mama's titty when he catched me. Joe Turner catched me in nineteen hundred and one. Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight. […] I was walking down this road in this little town outside Memphis. Come up on these fellows gambling. I was a deacon in the Abundant Life Church. I stopped to preach to these fellows to see if maybe I could turn some of them from their sinning when Joe Turner, brother of the Governor of the great sovereign state of Tennessee, swooped down on us and grabbed everybody there. Kept us all seven years. […] Got out from under Joe Turner on his birthday. […] Martha's gone. […] We [Zonia and Loomis] been looking for her ever since. […] That's the only thing I know to do. I just wanna see her face so *I can get me a starting place in the world.* […] I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 72; emphasis added).

Loomis's black rage is, unbeknownst to him, leading him to his ancestors; at this point in the play, he believes Martha is his future, as opposed to his past. Loomis's

storytelling elucidates the connection between black rage and historical identity in that Loomis's story gives me further insight into his past, why he is raging throughout the play, and his currently repressed and thus unknown self.

The Revolutionary Discovery

Loomis's triggered rage leads to a revolutionary discovery about his identity, via an ancestral blood sacrifice—he does not *need* Martha, or have to hide from Turner, he can stand on his own, with his ancestors. When Loomis acknowledges that he is connected to his slave ancestors, when he slashes himself, he becomes whole. Loomis cutting himself might seem to be violent, but it is not; it is more of a sacrificial action, resulting from his black rage (Burton 16). When Loomis slashed himself, the "shedding of his own blood is a baptism and a resurrection that sweeps over him with a transcendental force and finally sets his spirit free. […] the African wins" (Hayes 203-204). When Loomis slices himself, this is the play's perception shift. The perception shift occurs because of Loomis's self-discovery. During the perception shift, Loomis realizes three things: one, he is standing on his own two feet; two, he has found his song—the song of self-sufficiency; three, he accepts responsibility for his own presence in the world, as opposed to blaming Joe Turner or depending on Martha. When Loomis cuts himself, this is an act that releases Loomis's rage, at least a part of it (Burton 16).

When Loomis cuts himself, he also cleanses himself. This cleansing connects to a plant that was set in Act One, scene one, when Bynum told his "Secret of Life" story. During this story, Bynum's shiny man told him to rub his bloody hands all over himself, as a way of cleansing himself, and then suddenly the world got big (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 9). This plant comes to fruition when Loomis engages in a

rage-inspired blood ritual at the end of the play. After the ritual, he then goes out into the world. At this moment, Loomis's world becomes large. When Bynum's original shiny man tells him the blood on his hands will clean him, this is an early climactic plant (9). In "August Wilson's Blues Poetics," Paul Carter Harrison argues: "If renewal of spirit is to be made possible, the body must become transfigured. The ritual sacrifice of Loomis's body becomes the seeding of the new soul, the body gilded with the precious life force—blood—until it shines like the armor of pure song/spirit" (314). At the end of the play, when Loomis cuts himself, he is truly free; he drops the shackles that Joe Turner placed on him, and embraces his African identification (Herrington 85). Thus, Loomis's bloodletting is not violent, but rather a crucial sacrifice of the lost Loomis, in favor of a shiny man. At the end of the play, when Loomis exclaims that he is standing, this is the same thing as Loomis saying he has found his strong, African identity. Loomis's rejection of Martha is intricately tied to the perception shift because I (and Loomis himself) had been led to believe that Loomis's salvation was dependent on Martha, when it was really dependent on him.

In an interview with Nathan L. Grant, Wilson defines identity as understanding one's political and social history (108). Wilson utilized this definition as he wrote Loomis's story and resultant actions. At the end of the play, Loomis understands and accepts that his identity is intricately tied to his political and social history, which is connected to Africa, his ancestors, and Joe Turner (Herrington 92). Loomis is a product of American oppression, but the release of Loomis's black rage is a *healing* response to exploitation (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 12). This response to racism should not be silenced (as Seth tries to do in the play), because it can lead to revolutionary action that can change a society, which is implied at the end

of the play. Once Loomis understands his victimized past (political history) and rejects the claim of worthlessness that American society (specifically Joe Turner) placed on him (social history), he has to say "Good-bye" to what he lost at the hands of Joe Turner. Loomis also has to reclaim and embrace what Joe Turner was not able to take away from him—his song (Anderson 456).

Loomis is unable to stand up at the end of Act One because, as Wilson scholar Joan Herrington writes, he "is unable to accept what the vision is revealing to him—that slavery is his history, too, that these are his people, and that he must acknowledge his past if he is to establish his place in the world and move efficiently into the future" (Herrington 88). When Loomis leaves the Holly boardinghouse, after being taught by his ancestors, he is going to go out into the world to show black folks the light (Burton 17). Loomis is going to show black folks their history and how to embrace it, even the bad parts. Thus, triumphant black rage motivated and provoked Loomis to find his song.

Loomis's transformation strengthens all of the black characters, thus making Loomis's black rage a triumphant emotion, not only for him, but also for the other black characters in the play as well (Burton 17). When Loomis realizes and accepts his identity as a shiny man, this action motivates the other characters to embrace their "Africanness" to a larger degree, and figure out where Africa fits into their lives (Hayes 204). Thus, Loomis's realization becomes not an individual event, but rather a communal event. One example of how this is actualized in the play is Mattie running after Loomis after he leaves the Holly boardinghouse and goes out into the world (Joe Turner's Come and Gone 75-76). Though Mattie was presumably searching for her husband throughout the course of the play, what she was really

searching for, according to Bertha and Bynum, is a man who has discovered himself (Pereira 76). This is why she runs after Loomis; at the end of the play, he is this man. Once Mattie sees Loomis's self-empowerment, she now knows they can make room in their lives for each other (80). Mattie finds her identity as Loomis finds his; she is strengthened because of his renewed strength. Though Bynum led Loomis to shiny man status, even he is able to solidify his identity because of Loomis. Douglas Anderson, in his article, "Saying Goodbye to the Past: Self-Empowerment and History in Joe Turner's Come and Gone," explains that "for Bynum to see the shiny man 'again' means […] acting as the shiny-man guide to another. Seeing the shiny man again does not entail Bynum's deliverance from the world but confirmation of his contribution to it" (449). When Loomis becomes a shiny man, Bynum now knows his song is accepted, and his work with Loomis is complete.

Black rage and finding one's song are used as healing tools—the kind of healing response to oppression and exploitation that hooks writes about (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 121). Wilson scholar Kim Pereira argues that, without one's song,

> people are doomed to wander through life aimlessly, unaware of who they are or what their purpose may be. This song is the music of each person's essential nature, his or her *true identity*. And that identity, with its special rhythms, dictates the course of each one's destiny. Each song is unique, with its unique power that derives from the unique mix of each person's characteristics (63; emphasis added).

Wilson's message to his audience is to champion the positive aftereffects of black rage. In effect, he urges us—in spite of racial grief—not to repress our song, identity, or past, because only by embracing our past can we move on to a triumphant future.

Chapter 2: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1927)*

Introduction

With Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Wilson creates black characters in Chicago in March 1927 who are allegorical representations. These characters—all musicians—suffocate under an oppressive American social structure that continuously tells them they are nothing. Even when a character has great talent, as two characters (protagonist Levee and Ma) do, this talent only allows them to move up the American hierarchy to a minimal degree. Wilson adapted the real Ma Rainey's story to aid him in this allegorical play, as he created a fictional Ma Rainey. By using a real blues figure, Wilson's message takes on more weight. The play becomes not just a figment of Wilson's imagination, but rather a somewhat historical document with some fictional, illustrative characters. Wilson examines representations of the religious black man (Cutler), the racially conscious black man (Toledo), the sassy black mama character (Ma Rainey), and the confused, raging black man (Levee). Wilson shows the necessity of embracing one's personal and ancestral past and the people who reside in this circle in order to alleviate present persecution.

Wilson also demonstrates to his contemporary African-American audience what *not* to do when confronted with racial injustice—black rage leading to self-destruction and displaced violence. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom demonstrates how repressed, then triggered, black rage causes destruction. This play's presentation of black rage is distinctive from the others because it is the play cycle's most violent, unmotivated expression of fury. Also, this play is the only one in which the entire

African-American community is metaphorically affected, through the murder of Toledo, who, because of his intellectualism, represented the future of the community. In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Wilson illustrates how black rage can be used in a positive manner; just as Wilson uses his play cycle to depict various examples of black life, he gives the same treatment to rage. Black rage is not just good and it is not just bad, it can be both positive and negative. This is why two of the six plays (Seven Guitars being the other) I examine show the negative (and violent) instances of black rage. This detrimental, vicious black rage is realized in and hounds the Levee character. Levee is trying to run away from former hardships, including his rage. Levee fleeing from his past should raise a red flag for Wilson aficionados; any Wilson character that avoids or does not respect his/her past is going to be used to teach a lesson. According to Wilson, ignoring one's history (including the negative events) always leads to tragedy. The past is something Wilson uses in all of his plays; music is another tool Wilson utilizes in his cycle plays. In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the restraining of the past and one's choice in music are intricately tied, with both leading to the stimulation of Levee's rage. Levee's repression of his furor is metaphorically represented in his choice of music—jazz. This is another unique condition of the black rage in this play: it is embodied in the characters' choice of music.

Wilson uses music to establish combat lines, creating musical battles between the blues and jazz. Most characters express their resentment toward American society as they sing the blues, while the newer form of jazz encourages Levee to flee from his rage. Levee and jazz are on one side of the skirmish, and on the other side are the rest of the musical characters, who embrace the blues. I will use the

ideological differences between the two styles of music to structure the connections among oppression; restrained and then activated black rage; and self-destruction/displaced violence. In the south, from post-Civil War through the 1920s, the blues allow an oppressed people to obtain strength in the midst of their tribulations, while the newer jazz asks a burdened community to party their blues away. This dismissive quality is what leads Levee to jazz. When a white producer (Sturdyvant) rejects Levee's jazz music, his rage is provoked, leading to destructive behavior. The blues could have helped Levee temper his emotions and placate a self-destructive and violent reaction. While I am not suggesting that oppression should be pacified, harmful feelings and conduct should. In the best case scenario, Levee's oppression and inflamed black rage should have led to action that would better his position and the African-American community in general, as was seen with Loomis in Joe Turner's Come and Gone; this, however, is not the character Wilson created. Instead, character is defined by music, making Ma Rainey's Black Bottom a blues-as-drama presentation of the consequences of not understanding two things: one, the relationship between self and history/culture, and two, one's own black rage (Smith 185).

Though Loomis in Joe Turner's Come and Gone and Levee in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom have difficulty comprehending their connection to their pasts and its connection to their rage, this confusion is realized in two different ways. Loomis conceives that there is a link between himself and his yesterdays; he just did not understand that his history was *not* solely defined by his past with Martha. Levee does not even acknowledge that his wants, desires, and fears are motivated by his horrible memories. This denial prevents Levee from realizing the life for which he is

striving. Loomis's black rage led to his self-discovery, but Levee's black rage turns self-destructive.

Thus, through negative example, Wilson shows his audience how turning away from one's community, especially in favor of "the enemy," can lead to murder. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom depicts the experiences and social politics of Blacks in America in the 1920s by showing a day in these characters' lives and the social structure in which they lived, as well as the injustices they had to endure. I witness how these characters dealt with their black rage. I suggest that there are two ways of dealing with the fury: accept and embrace it, or reject it and self-destruct. These allegorical characters can help us navigate the racial landmines in America, avoiding black-on-black crime.

Synopsis

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom begins and ends in one day in Chicago in early March 1927. Blues singer Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's white record producer and white manager are preparing for Ma's arrival at the recording studio. Forty-one-year-old Ma, who is always dressed to the nines, befitting her royal status as "Mother of the Blues," is to record songs with her band, which is comprised of guitar and trombone player Cutler, bass player Slow Drag, piano player Toledo (all in their mid-50s) and trumpet player Levee (in his early 30s). This stark age difference speaks to the generational difference between the musical characters, though this is not the only difference between the characters. The band members represent various types of black men: Cutler is the religious black man; Slow Drag is the black man who just wants to survive in America without any trouble; Toledo is the black intellectual; and Levee is the ambitious, young black male who is impulsive and represses a huge

amount of grief and pain. Producer Mel Sturdyvant is representative of the cultural vulture, as he is willing to use Ma's talent for financial gain without respecting her as a human being. Though Irvin, her manager, is not drawn as negatively as Sturdyvant, in some ways he is more dangerous, since he pretends to be Ma's ally, though Ma is quite aware that this is not the case. Ma symbolizes a true diva with a twist. Traditionally, divas are demanding because they possess a talent that people want. Though Ma possesses an authentic talent, she can only be a diva in the studio while Sturdyvant and Irvin are recording her songs. Once the recording session is done, Ma becomes just another disenfranchised black woman in American society.

Throughout the course of the play, Ma and the band members deal differently with "The Man." Ma believes that Blacks should get what they can out of white people because as soon as they are done with you, you will become just another nigger or whore. In the 1920s, owners of mass technology, like music recording, were white, and did not see the art of the record, only the financial profit; therefore, art is no more than product, while the artist is no more than labor (McKelly 146). Slow Drag believes that Blacks should just barrel through whatever The Man throws at you (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 452). Cutler simply stays out of the white man's way. Toledo concludes that Blacks should not deal with white people; instead, Blacks should focus on bettering themselves (468). Lastly, Levee is convinced that the white man is to be handled; he advocates sneaking into the white world, gaining control over it, and then plotting revenge (478).

Wilson sets up numerous conflicts among his characters, most of them swirling around Levee. Levee and Cutler argue over religious issues, while Levee and Toledo debate philosophical points, usually involving race. Since music is such a

crucial part of the play, it is appropriate that two of the larger battles revolve around music. Levee and Ma's conflicted relationship rests in the fact that Levee wants to play the new music that is representative of the North (i.e., jazz/swing music), while Ma wants to stick with old-school southern music, represented by the blues. Sturdyvant and Levee's discord is rooted in Sturdyvant quite easily casting off Levee's desire to be a star. Ma's relationship with Irvin and Sturdyvant is antagonist, and provides Wilson with various opportunities to have Ma exert her power. In these instances, Ma releases her black rage.

As the band waits for Ma, they banter, argue, tease each other (specifically about each other's shoes), and rehearse. It is during rehearsal that Levee tells the other band members that Sturdyvant is going to allow him to record some songs. Levee believes that this is his ticket to independence and respectability in American society; this is the first major plant in the play (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 437). As the band members wait, they also discuss their placement as black men in American society. When Ma finally does arrive, it is within a mass of chaos involving herself, a Chicago police officer, her stuttering nephew, Sylvester, and her sensual girlfriend, Dussie Mae. Ma's conflict with the Chicago police officer is a small example of the racial antagonism that Ma endures throughout the course of the play. Once the commotion is over, but before the band and Ma commence to record songs, Levee tells the band members how a gang of white men raped his mother and killed his father. As Ma belittles Irvin and Sturdyvant (a regular occurrence among the three), the band members continue to discuss what life is like as black men in 1920s America.

Eventually the songs are recorded, Ma and her entourage leave the studio, and Sturdyvant reneges on his offer to Levee, effectively shattering his dreams for social mobility. Sturdyvant leaves the band room, Levee's black rage is activated and he kills Toledo—stabbing him in the back, ostensibly because Toledo stepped on Levee's shoes. Metaphorically, Levee's shoes represent the white middle class culture of which he desperately wants to be a part. When Toledo scuffs Levee's aspirations, Levee rushes at Toledo with his knife, and this is the play's perception shift (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 519). Though I am surprised that Levee murders Toledo, because he had been previously set up as a bragger, as opposed to a doer, I also understand why he does it, because of the plants Wilson sets up throughout the play. I realize that Toledo's murder, in addition to being a consequence of displaced violence, is really about Levee's crushed dreams, and the social and racial injustices he suffers.

Violent Black Rage

In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Wilson urges his audience, specifically his African-American audience, to consider the consequences of unexamined black rage. Black folks are not naturally full of fury, but rather these emotions are incited by external occurrences, like oppression, one's location, or rejection by dominant culture. Wilson suggests that if one's ire is understood, he/she will be able to deal with it, preventing these feelings from turning violent. Each character in the play deals with rage differently. For example, Levee and the band members do not and would not express their true feelings in front of white people; however, Ma, the most powerful black character in the play, does. Ma's power affords her a temporary release of her furor, while the older band members have learned how to suppress their

resentment, preventing it from turning into a more dangerous emotion. Levee will not employ either option; instead, his rage becomes uncontrollable. This rage occurs in primarily two locations, the band room and the studio, both of which are tied to America's racial hierarchy.

Since Wilson uses Levee as the allegorical model to speak to the African-American audience specifically, and Wilson's audience in general, it is crucial that Wilson provides various examples (Levee's fight with Cutler, Slow Drag stepping on his shoes) that show Levee is not an angry black man randomly raging at the world, but rather he is a black man experiencing justifiable rage in response to his oppression. Levee must be a sympathetic character, so that we will try to understand his plight. With the back history that Wilson provides, however, I can understand why Levee kills Toledo. This back-story further highlights Levee's tragic life and will hopefully prevent contemporary African Americans from following in Levee's footsteps. Levee did not kill Toledo because Toledo stepped on Levee's shoe; Levee killed Toledo because of the racial torment he endured, most recently by Sturdyvant. Wilson is not saying that all tormented people murder, but rather what could happen if one's anguish is not examined and respected.

Thirteen pages before Levee kills Toledo at the end of Act Two, Levee is not an immanently vicious person. When Cutler tells Levee he is going to burn in Hell because Levee is blasphemous, Levee responds:

> LEVEE: What I care about burning in hell? [...] Why didn't God strike some of them crackers [who were harassing a black preacher] down? [...] I'll tell you why! [...] 'Cause he a white man's God. That's why! God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers [...] God hates niggers! [...] God can kiss my ass.

> (*CUTLER can stand no more. He jumps up and punches LEVEE in the mouth. [...] CUTLER has LEVEE down on the floor and pounds on him with a fury. […LEVEE…] pulls out a knife*.)
>
> TOLEDO: Come on, Levee…put the knife up! [...] That ain't no way to solve nothing […]
>
> LEVEE: (*to CUTLER.*) I'm calling your God! I'm gonna give him a chance to save you! [...] Cutler's God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama! [...] And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? […]
>
> (*LEVEE becomes so caught up in his dialogue with God he forgets about CUTLER and begins to stab upward in the air […]*)
>
> Coward, motherfucker! [...] Your God ain't shit, Cutler (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 507-509).

Levee pulling a knife on Cutler is a plant because it sets up the perception shift of Levee killing Toledo at the end of the play. This plant is surprising because Cutler does *not* get cut. Levee not stabbing Cutler sets up the major climactic perception shift, when Toledo is knifed. If Wilson simply wanted Levee to cut someone, this exchange would have been the perfect opportunity, yet Levee does not wound Cutler, because at this point in the play Sturdyvant has not yet rejected Levee. Though Levee has had to endure a lot of oppression in his life, Sturdyvant's rejection is the most significant instance since Levee believed that with the musical success Sturdyvant offered, he would finally be done with being a downtrodden African American. Before Sturdyvant leaves the band room and Levee's aspiration on the floor, Levee was as close as he has ever been to achieving his dream. This is why this encounter is the breaking point for Levee. Before Sturdyvant strips Levee of his dream, Levee is not a violent person, as his encounter with Cutler proves. The fight scene between Cutler and Levee also supports my claim that Levee did not kill Toledo because Toledo stepped on Levee's shoes. It would seem more appropriate to kill someone

because they battered you rather than scuffing your shoe. Levee may have been angry with Cutler, but Levee's homicidal rage had not been provoked.

Furthermore, if Levee's motivation for killing Toledo was connected to Toledo stepping on Levee's shoes, Slow Drag should have been murdered twenty-two pages into the play, when Slow Drag steps on Levee's shoes. Instead the following exchange occurs:

> SLOW DRAG: Shhheeeeet!
> (*He crosses to get his string and steps on LEVEE's shoes.*)
>
> LEVEE: Damn, Slow Drag! Watch them big-ass shoes you got.
>
> SLOW DRAG: Boy, ain't nobody done nothin' to you.
>
> LEVEE: You done stepped on my shoes.
>
> SLOW DRAG: Move them the hell out the way, then. You was in my way...I wasn't in your way.
> (*CUTLER lights up another reefer. SLOW DRAG rummages around in his belongings for a string. LEVEE takes out a rag and begins to shine his shoes.*)
>
> You can shine these when you get done, Levee (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 450).

This exchange is a major plant, which further points to the climactic perception shift, when Toledo is murdered. Slow Drag does not even apologize for his slight; Toledo did apologize, and still wound up dead. When Slow Drag stepped on Levee's shoes, Slow Drag was belligerent; 68 pages later, after Sturdyvant's rejection, Toledo steps on Levee's shoes and shows remorse.

> (*TOLEDO walks past LEVEE and steps on his shoe.*)
>
> LEVEE: Hey! Watch it...Shit, Toledo! You stepped on my shoe!
>
> TOLEDO: Excuse me there, Levee.

> LEVEE: Look at that! Look at that! Nigger, you stepped on my shoe. What you do that for?
>
> TOLEDO: I said I'm sorry.
>
> LEVEE: Nigger gonna step on my goddamn shoe! You done fucked up my shoe! Look at that! Look at what you done to my shoe, nigger! I ain't stepped on your shoe! What you wanna step on my shoe for? (Wilson 518).

Shortly after this exchange, Levee stabs Toledo. Wilson writes a conspicuous difference between Levee's reactions in the two scenes; in the first scene, Levee accepts Slow Drag's mistake and moves on; in the second, Levee kills Toledo for the same mistake. Though Levee's involvement in Toledo's murder is mostly because of Sturdyvant, the fact that the band members were relegated to the band room should also be noted. It is significant that each of these three textual examples, each of which shows how Levee responds to his fellow band members, occurs in the band room because rage is strictly connected to location.

Though there are three racialized spaces (the control room, the studio, and the band room), ostensibly characters can only express their rage in two of them—the band room and the studio; Levee's rage cannot be appropriately spent *because of* the confines of the band room. In his dissertation, "True Wests: Twentieth-Century Portraits of the Artist as a Young American," James C. McKelly delineates the stage space and its relation to each character's hierarchical placement:

> Wilson's set, a recording studio, provides a physical structure that is the symbolic embodiment of these hierarchies within which nascent African-American artistic production must fight for birth. The lowest rung in the studio ladder, in the basement of the building, is the band room, where the players can relax between sessions. The players may speak and act freely there, but their words and deeds, relegated to a realm where they are unseen and unheard, can have no unmediated or untrammeled affect upon production or performance decisions. The studio itself, on a level above the band room, is Ma's turf […] where she demands the respect of the producer, if she is to

> perform. And above the studio […] is the control room […] The aloof quality of the control booth is accentuated by the fact that a horn is its only means of communication with the performers, emblematic of a remote, disembodied authority that, though it hears all, can be approached only through an intermediary (146-147).

Ma can be a diva in the upstairs studio (where the white characters spend most of their time) or in the band room, and she does so in both rooms. In contrast, most of the band members' action is relegated to the segregated basement band room. The musicians talk freely in the band room—until one of the white characters enters and invades their space, then the band members stop talking. The last plant before the climactic plant (when Levee discusses the racist traumas from his childhood) happens this way; when Sturdyvant enters the band room, Levee jumps to attention. This plant (action) tells me about Sturdyvant and Levee's relationship (who is in control and who is trying to please whom). When Levee jumps to attention, I immediately know the hierarchy of the relationship—Levee wants something from Sturdyvant and is trying to ingratiate himself into Sturdyvant's good graces in the hopes that he will receive whatever he desires. After this plant is realized and Sturdyvant has left the band room, Levee moves into his defining monologue, which explains Levee's relationship with Whites and why he runs from his past. Later, when Sturdyvant rejects Levee, Levee wants to make him pay, but Sturdyvant leaves the band room, effectively taking away Levee's opportunity. When Sturdyvant slams the door in Levee's face, it is as if Levee was invisible and locks him into the black-segregated basement—the bottom. Levee cannot express his true feelings in front of Sturdyvant or toward Sturdyvant, therefore his feelings become displaced into Toledo's back.

Toledo, Cutler, and Slow Drag, displaying the complacency that comes with age, have learned to live with their rage and not allow it to overtake their lives. While

the band members might repress their feelings, unlike Levee, they allow those feelings to dissipate. These three band members recognized that life for Blacks in America in the 1920s was inherently unfair, and they also accepted that there was nothing they could do about this social condition. As Toledo tells Levee, they are *lucky* that they are entertainers because they could be hauling wood, like most other black men (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 502). Though Wilson is not advocating that this choice is a desirable one, it is a more successful choice than Levee's.

Ma, on the other hand, has learned how to release her sadness and grief in small doses, as witnessed each time she makes a demand of Sturdyvant or Irvin. With Ma, these painful feelings dissipate each time she engages in some diva-like action. Therefore, in the play, Ma's rage is never truly repressed or built up, because her rage is constantly being expressed.

Unlike Ma and his fellow band members, Levee ignores his rage until it is too late. He does not learn how to live with his pain and grief, as the band members do, and neither is he able to express it, as Ma does. That is, until it is activated, he self-destructs, and sticks his knife with all its fury into Toledo, instead of the white men he wanted to kill. Levee's violent black rage demonstrates its potential brutality to members of the African-American community.

Levee does not identify the white men who raped his mother and killed his father as the source of his rage. As hooks observes, Whites "do not imagine […] the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures" ("Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination" 341). Whites have impacted Levee's life negatively since he was a child; he has been terrorized, stabbed, and afflicted. In addition to those white men

who destroyed Levee's family, now Levee can add Sturdyvant to the list of Whites who have oppressed him and ruined his life. The ironic thing is that Whites are not the only ones who do not understand or acknowledge how their presence impacts Blacks' lives; Levee himself does not understand this imposing connection. In this way, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is an argument for the need to identify the cause of black rage. Wilson advocates that African Americans must identify the source of their rage in order to prevent it from imploding in the African-American community. If Levee had acknowledged and understood his history, he would have been able to depend on his community rather than placing all of his faith in Sturdyvant.

Blues and Jazz: Defining Community

Unlike Wilson's other cycle plays, which are all set in Pittsburgh, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is set in Chicago. By setting the play in Chicago in 1927, he could examine the ideological battle between the blues and jazz. According to Ma Rainey scholar Sandra R. Lieb, 1927 was a year of crossroads for the blues and jazz. It was during this year, in Chicago, that jazz wrestled the popular musical crown away from the blues (Lieb 37, 39, 42; Stewart-Baxter 44). Chicago was the center of the blues in the 1920s and 1930, and by 1922 it was also the center of the jazz universe, so this city was the hub of two differing styles of music (Mabunda 899-901, 902).

The difference between the blues and jazz is that jazz literally had more swing to it than the blues (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 430). Swing music was just a later name for jazz (Travis 9). It was the "Swing Era," beginning in 1926, that allowed jazz to reach a level of popular (i.e., white) acceptance because of the dancing and carefree feelings the music inspired (Mabunda 903).

The progression from the blues to jazz/swing was not just about music, but rather it was connected to social movement within the African-American community. In her dissertation, "A Critical and Historical Analysis of Five Major Plays by August Wilson," Corlis Hayes explains the differences between the blues and jazz/swing, and how this division also mirrored a split with some members in the African-American community:

> The conflict between the proponents of the "old" and new form of music (the "swing") is a metaphor for a clash of values. […] The new form of music […] is an extended metaphor for the 1920s Negro bourgeoisie. […] Black Americans were "moving up", attempting to assimilate in the mainstreams of America. […] Subsequently, during the 1920s the blues were increasingly shunned by middle-class blacks who tried to assimilate into the mainstream of white culture, […as…] The "old" blues is personified by the downtrodden, Southern black (100-101).

Blues and Jazz: Defining Character

According to popular music scholar Arnold Shaw:

> The blues evolved as a folk music during the post-Civil War period, embodying the feelings, problems and experiences of black people as they suffered through the transition from slavery to "freedman." Transmitted orally and "written" and "rewritten" by countless unknown figures, they remained a regional, rural, southern music into the twentieth century (67).

As Ma tells Cutler, the blues are "life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life" (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 491). Ma, who sings the blues, understands life. Levee, who does not want to sing the blues, does not want to understand life. In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Wilson, I believe, is encouraging African Americans to embrace the blues as a time-honored way of understanding life. Throughout the course of the play, the music—in addition to serving as quasi-dialogue (when characters sing)—is often used as plot points: the music motivates the action, thus moving the plot along. Though music is used in the

majority of Wilson's plays, it is used most explicitly here in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

Ma Rainey and Levee personify the conflict between the blues and jazz, respectively. The rage that is examined in this play rests on the differences between the blues and jazz, set sharply against each other in the city of Chicago. Chicago was a major destination for migrating Blacks in the 1920s. Ma respects those migrating Blacks and their beloved blues, and Levee ignores them, because they represent the past.

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey was born in Columbus, Georgia, on April 26, 1886. She made her theatrical debut when she was approximately 14 years old and married William "Pa" Rainey on February 2, 1904. After splitting from him, Ma began to amass fame among southern Blacks that was legendary, since she was one of the first performers (around 1902) to feature blues on stage (Stewart-Baxter 36-37, 38). Blues scholar Daphne Duval Harrison explains how Ma acquainted southern Blacks with the blues as she traveled on the theater circuit. One of Ma's strengths was her ability to help her black fans, who were far away from home, remember family and friends (Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s 23). Harrison states that Ma:

> is said to be the first singer to use the blues as a part of her repertoire in minstrel acts. […] Her ability to capture the mood and essence of black rural southern life quickly endeared her to throngs of followers throughout the South. Ma's straightforward singing style was especially suited to the contents of her blues, which described the drudgery, pain, and joys of her folk. […] Her audiences reacted to her with affection because she maintained a bond with them; she understood their lives (34-36).

Ma loved her people, and her voice burst forth with a declaration of courage and determination—a reaffirmation of black life (40). There was a link between Ma and her audience, which allowed *her* and *them* to acknowledge and deal with the

oppression in their lives. When examining Ma's voice and her appeal to her black audience, Ma Rainey scholar Derrick Stewart-Baxter explains, "hers was not a big voice, it was at times, harsh, but it was ideally suited to her simple songs of everyday life, and her driving 'down home' blues" (38). Ma "was a person of the folk" (42). Even though she possessed an immense talent, Ma did not believe she was better than her audience; she connected with her audience, partially because she knew that the black audience made her (and her jug band) successful enough to crown her the "Mother of the Blues."

While Levee avoids his past because of the death and destruction it holds, Ma, throughout the course of the play, constantly uses the power of her past and her audience to make demands of Sturdyvant and Irvin. When Irvin tries to get Ma to jazz up her song, she replies:

> I'm gonna tell you something, Irvin … and you go on up there and tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. […] Levee ain't messing up my song with none of his music shit. Now, if that don't set right with you and Sturdyvant … then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, 'cause I don't like it up here no ways (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 473-474).

Ma refers to her tent shows, populated with her supportive southern fans. Ma's music and its connection to her past give her power, and define her character. The variances between Ma and Levee are also the distinctions between the blues and jazz/swing. In her dissertation, "A Critical and Historical Analysis of Five Major Plays by August Wilson," Corlis Hayes argues that "He [Levee] has no patience with those like Ma Rainey who advocate what he calls the 'old' blues. Thus, he seeks to *disavow the roots of his music* because they lie in a past that has too many harsh memories for him, and he wants them blotted out altogether" (92; emphasis added).

It should not be surprising that Levee shuns the old forms, as did the 1920s black bourgeoisie, since he himself aspires to enter the black middle class. Levee feels that he is entitled to something—possibly respect, definitely success—as it is defined in America, to some extent because white men killed his father, partly because he is a black man with talent. Instead of dealing with himself and his past, however, Levee hopes to re-invent himself, to hide his old self in the new middle class Levee. This repression of his original self, born in the oppressive American south, exacerbates Levee's restricted rage and sets him on a violent path.

McKelly elucidates the debate between Ma and Levee, the blues and jazz/swing, and its connection to oppression and states:

> The musical artist of the period [1920s], of which Wilson's central characters are potently representative types, is challenged by the emerging issues of artistic direction forced by this cultural ambiguity: whether to continue to compose and perform music that confirms and enriches a southern tradition, thereby serving both nostalgia and authenticity, or to devote energy and vision to a more urban, contemporary evolution of the form, thereby serving relevance and currency (145).

Ma's music confirms and enriches a southern tradition and her southern audience, while Levee is looking to make a lot of money, to be somebody, to be relevant in the white world, completing ignoring white majority oppression, which he has been a victim of most of his life. By gravitating towards jazz and ignoring the blues, Levee does not manage the cultural, relational, and aesthetic balancing act that Ma does, partly because he is too eager to please dominant culture.

Ma, on the other hand, embraces the blues and its power; as a result, she is able to admit she is a victim of oppression. Her blues are about forming community with others who are suffering the same problems. She is very protective of the blues, as Irvin finds out when he tries to tamper with Ma's blues and, thus, her identity.

When Irvin asks Ma to sing Levee's jazzier version of her song, "Black Bottom," Ma says, "I don't like to sing it that way. I'm doing it the *old* way" (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 472; emphasis added). Then Irvin tells Ma that Levee's version is what the people (meaning white and urban black masses) want and that times are changing (472). Later, Ma remembers Levee's trumpet playing—"I couldn't keep up with what was going on" (510). Ma cannot "keep up" with the shift in music and ideology; Levee's music is not comfortable to her. At its bases, both types of music are similar; it is the ideology behind the two types of music that are different. The blues are an older form of music, from which the later jazz metamorphosed. Conversely, Levee's jazz music can be disseminated to a popular audience *because of* the success of Ma's blues. Levee does not recognize that his new music is really the old music transformed. He owes the blues a debt of gratitude, but instead of offering this, he belittles the blues and runs from the past it denotes. Levee's music is looking toward the future; in his mind, the future has to be better than the past he has endured.

In her dissertation, "Emi: The Concept of Spirit in Selected Plays of August Wilson," Vera Lynn Nobles explains the difference between Levee and Ma and the other band members, and how this difference connects to cultural identity. Nobles states, "Rainey and the three older musicians identify with *their musical heritage* and so indicate by refusing to adopt the innovations desired by Levee, who is driven by his strong sense of individualism and *disconnection to other humans* because of his lack of *cultural identity* and allegiance to tradition" (82; emphasis added). Levee's passion for jazz and innovation would, under normal circumstances, be a perfectly legitimate choice. But Levee chooses to adopt jazz, individuality, and improvisation in order to run away from his heritage, which disconnects him from his fellow band

members. So, even when Levee is using something from his past (improvisation), he is not using it in a positive, communal way, but rather in a disruptive, destructive way. Levee's co-opting of the blues in a negative fashion, and his gravitating to jazz in general, is indicative of how he deals with racism. Unlike Ma and the other band members who *live in* their oppression through their music, Levee's music allows him to run away from his grief and pain, two components that make up his black rage.

Levee's strategy is to ignore the grief and pain. In his article, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Playing the Blues as Equipment for Living," Philip E. Smith II writes that: "Levee's solution for the problems of black people is to forget them, as Irvin and Sturdyvant have urged; he sings and dances a few lines of 'Doctor Jazz': 'when the world goes wrong and I have got the blues / He's the man who makes me put on my dancing shoes'" (181). Levee gravitates towards jazz because it is about putting on your dancing shoes, ignoring your blues and going out dancing.

Wilson uses Levee and his choices as an allegorical guide, telling contemporary African Americans that they need to depend on their pasts as they move into their futures. Hayes argues that:

> in Wilson's view, Levee's individualist outlook contradicts the black perspective. By preferring to see himself as an autonomous individual, he has betrayed his roots and history. In seeking to discover his identity through the new music, he chooses to reject the black values that define the identity of all black Americans. Levee is an urban black man alienated from the blues (107).

Wilson is suggesting that Levee's is not a good path for African Americans to take *because* it is neither rooted in the African nor African-American community. Levee does not want to be a team player, a part of the community. This decision alienates him from his people, both past and present. If Levee had dealt with and understood

his past, his oppression, and his rage, he would not have turned to Sturdyvant for support.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom suggests that neither self-discovery nor success (material or otherwise) can be achieved by relying on one's oppressor. Tragedy can result when the oppressed (Levee) expects his oppressor (Sturdyvant) to provide an escape route from persecution, as opposed to depending on similarly burdened people (Ma and the other band members). Smith explains the mistake Levee made as he attempted to become somebody:

> Levee's strategy for survival, to smile and say yessir, *but to advance only himself*, to write and sell music to white men, to be inspired by *Doctor Jazz* and the white man's advice to forget his troubles, to buy new Florsheim shoes and clothes and scorn those who wear country clod-hoppers, to *reject his rural heritage* and the solidarity and *wisdom of the older band members*, in short, *to sell his soul to the devil and leave behind his roots and the crimes against his family, all make him into a black man alienated from the blues people*, into a foolish Faustian individualist searching for money, fashion, fame, sexual pleasure, dancing, and all the urban "good times" *he feels he is owed* to make up for the scars he bears on his body and his soul (Smith 182; emphasis added).

Self-discovery must be realized through self (as was seen with Loomis in Joe Turner's Come and Gone). In order to achieve true self-discovery, the pain of the past, or its resultant black rage cannot be subdued; and neither can one's troubles be easily forgotten, as Levee attempts to do. Levee is a doomed character from the beginning, because he curbs his anger and places his undying faith in Sturdyvant.

Levee's fascination with Sturdyvant's white power blinds Levee to his own past and *its* power. By writing jazz, Levee is trying to please Sturdyvant and find popular/white acceptance. This choice and Toledo's observation of it sets up one of Wilson's major plants, which is a truism spoken by Toledo. This truth foreshadows Levee and Toledo's connected destruction at the end of the play:

> TOLEDO: See, now [...] I'll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say [...] as long as he looks to white folks for approval [...] then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing (448).

This quest for white approval, all the while ignoring his past, will lead to Levee's downfall.

At the end of the play, Levee is surrounded by destruction and violence, because he has placed his search for his song at the feet of the enemy. In order to obtain the identity he was striving for, Levee's music had to be consumed by a white audience. When Levee's song is figuratively and literally snatched from him (by music appropriator Sturdyvant) and his dreams are crushed, this leads to Levee's ruin. Because Levee never found his true song, as does Loomis in Joe Turner's Come and Gone, his black rage could not be productively deployed. At the end of the play, Levee has no greater self-knowledge than at the beginning.

Musical Structure Defining Oppression

Wilson depicts the band members' confrontations with racism through riffs, vamps, and blues solos, which are actually realized in the play through storytelling and monologue; each band members' riffs/vamps/blues solos are also allegories of history in American society (Elkins 37). In other words, these stories illustrate instances of American history, a history that includes oppression. The resultant actions, including displaced violence, occur because of the oppression found in the riffs, vamps, and blues solos.

Albert Murray defines a blues riff as "a brief musical phrase that is repeated, sometimes with very subtle variations, over the length of a stanza as the chordal pattern follows its normal progression" (Caponi 98). A riff is brief, differentiating it

from a blues solo, which, as the name implies, is more like an entire song. Wilson presents blues riffs as brief stories, instead of the more traditional "brief musical phrase." It is not as if the same, specific story is told and re-told in the play, but rather Wilson provides various stories on the same topic of oppression; thus, Wilson achieves "subtle variations" on a theme. The "length of a stanza" following "its normal progression" is similar to the action of the play progressing forward, occasionally being interrupted by these riffs, which then add substance to the story/action. The action in this play is recording Ma's songs. This activity is punctuated by stories/riffs from the band members and Ma.

The riffs that Wilson writes for the band members (and to a lesser degree, Ma) are often about their uncensored perceptions of white Americans and the hardships they (or their peers) have endured at the hands of Whites; this is also seen through Wilson's use of vamps. The word "vamp" is defined by Murray as "an improvised *introduction* consisting of anything from the repetition of a choral progression as a warm-up exercise to an improvised overture" (Caponi 96; emphasis added). The band members' different, though similarly oppressive, stories are representative of "the repetition of a choral progression." In Marilyn Elkins's August Wilson: a Casebook, Eileen Crawford places the blues term "vamp" within the context of the play: "Their [the band members] narratives told in a vamp-until-ready motif as they await Ma's appearance disclose their encounters with America's virulent racism in the 1920s" (36). The oppression the band members and their peers endured is what Crawford refers to as "virulent racism."

The difference between a vamp and a riff is placement—vamps occur before an event. Vamps introduce something, in this case, Ma's arrival. So, all of the stories

before Ma's arrival can be classified as vamps, while those after her arrival are riffs or blues solos. The riffs and vamps told by the band members can also be referred to as prose blues. Whether these stories are called prose blues, vamps or riffs, they are both essentially Blacks' equipment for living in White America, and used to deal with the cruelty enacted by Whites (Smith 179). To structure his placement of riffs and vamps, Wilson does what Levee does not—turns back to the past for guidance.

Wilson turns back to Africa and its storytelling tradition, as he creates riffs that allow his characters to talk about their oppression. Nobles explains that:

> August Wilson, as storyteller, uses the "Oral" principle. It encompasses the elements of orature developed by African peoples to deal with intricate life situations. […African-American orature is defined…] as ranging from the spirituals, *the blues* and the work songs to the sermons, proverbs and the telling of tales. Through the "Oral" principle, the drama unfolds. It is the "Oral" principle, as medium, that allows the multiplicity of stories to be told in their resounding curvilinearity (94; emphasis added).

Wilson uses the oral principal to expose his characters' historical lives. Though there are many ways to realize these characters' histories, Wilson uses the blues to encourage an understanding of their lives. This is the function of the blues in Wilson's plays—to facilitate storytelling, to help African Americans, and to give honor to Mother Africa. Wilson scholar Joan Herrington clarifies the role of the blues-man, and how it connects to Wilson and Africa: "A descendant of the *griote*, an African story teller, the blues-man's role was to voice the truths, ironies, joys, heartbreak, and suppressed anger of the community. Wilson also understands the ways in which people use the blues as comfort and solace" (27). One way in which Wilson utilizes the blues as relief is to show how the blues can heal (29). Like the griote and real blues-men, Wilson's fictional blues-men and the blues themselves tell stories; oftentimes these stories bring comfort to fellow sufferers. Wilson uses the

oral principal to tell his drama, utilizing the blues, black rage, and oppression, placing them within storytelling and monologue. In his article, "August Wilson's Bottomless Blackness," Michael Feingold explains Wilson's connection to storytelling:

> Tied to the mythic sense is August's love of storytelling, which as a mode of theatrical performance has stronger roots in the African than in the Western past. Some of the stories in *Ma Rainey* are background data; others […] reveal the character's preoccupations […] For August they're expressions of the characters' relative positions in the group as well as of their psychology: […Wilson states…] So what I tried to do is isolate them [his characters] and find out why he told it this way then (118).

Wilson's use of storytelling does not only relay content information; how that story is enacted also tells something about the character's essence. These depictions of oppression, presented through storytelling and monologue, especially Levee's defining monologue, will lead to displaced violence.

Wilson uses a blues solo, presented in the form of a monologue, at the end of Act One to detail the atrocities enacted upon Levee's family by White America. This monologue, which exemplifies Wilson's affinity for storytelling, attempts to illustrate why Levee is running from the injustices in his past, what his grievances are, and how Levee's past led to his current resentment. Toward the end of Act One, after Sturdyvant leaves the band members in the band room, they tease Levee about shucking and jiving in front of the producer. Levee responds that he knows how to handle the white man—from experience. He then proceeds to tell the following story:

> I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted. […] It was coming on planting time and my daddy went into Natchez [Mississippi] to get him some seed and fertilizer. Called me, say, "Levee, you the man of the house now. Take care of your mama while I'm gone." I wasn't but a little boy, eight years old.
>
> (*Pauses.*)

> My mama was frying up some chicken when them mens come in that house. Must have been eight or nine of them. She standing there frying that chicken and them mens come and took hold of her just like you take hold of a mule and make him do what you want.
>
> (*Pauses.*)
>
> There was my mama with a gang of white mens. She tried to fight them off, but I could see where it wasn't gonna do her any good, I didn't know what they were doing to her…but I figured whatever it was they may as well do to me too. My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it. […] I tried my damnedest to cut one of them's throat! […] He [one of the white men] reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it.
>
> (*LEVEE raises his shirt to show a long, ugly scar.*)
>
> That's what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death. […] My daddy came back […] He found out who they was and then we announced we was moving […] He got us settled in and then took off one day. I ain't never seen him since. He sneaked back, hiding up in the woods, laying to get them eight or nine men.
>
> (*Pauses.*)
>
> He got four of them before they got him. […] Caught up with him and hung him and set him afire (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 479-481).

This blues solo is the play's climactic plant, which sets me up for the perception shift. Before his past is revealed in the blues solo, most of Levee's comments/lines are funny or annoying. After his past is revealed, Levee's lines take on a more serious air, and I understand them in a graver manner. What Wilson does with the Levee character, as Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon suggests, is to weed out the real culprits in Toledo's murder, using Levee's blues solo ("The Long Wait: August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*" 144). Levee is not solely responsible for his circumstances; his worldview did not develop in a vacuum. Wilson explains the trajectory of Levee's life and the resultant displaced violence by providing me with

information about Levee's violent childhood. These childhood events left Levee harboring and repressing a hatred that continued to fester until it was triggered by Sturdyvant's rejection and Toledo stepping on his shoes. Levee's childhood abuse, for example, shaped how Levee, the adult, would deal with oppression and violent feelings.

Defining Displaced Violence

bell hooks grew up in the segregated South. There she observed some consequences of black-on-black crime. hooks explains:

> I [hooks] grew up in the apartheid South. We learned when we were very little that black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong white folks. We learned to choke down our rage. This process of repression was aided by the existence of our separate neighborhoods [...] We […] lived in denial. And in living that way we were able to mute our rage. If black folks did strange, weird, or even brutally cruel acts now and then in our neighborhoods (cut someone to pieces over a card game, shoot somebody for looking at them the wrong way), we did not link this event to the myriad abuses and humiliations black folks suffered daily when we crossed the tracks and did what we had to do with and for whites to make a living. To express rage in that context was suicidal. Every black person knew it. Rage was reserved for life at home–for one another (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 13-14).

The black folks in hooks's quotation are Levee's kin; Levee's murderous fury was a result of his rage. Once Sturdyvant rejects Levee, the levee finally breaks; all of the frustrated rage and violence can no longer be contained behind the dam of repressed black rage. Toledo is murdered, and the African-American community suffers, since Toledo was the hope of the community and the character most connected to Africa (McKelly 155).

In Marilyn Elkins's August Wilson: a casebook, Kim Marra analyzes why Toledo's murder happens after Sturdyvant rejects Levee:

> Not surprisingly, the pain and frustration of this public emasculation [at the hands of Sturdyvant] push Levee into a volatile rage. The seemingly small provocation of Toledo scuffing one of his *fancy new Florsheim shoes, signifiers of his thwarted economic aspirations*, moves him to plunge a knife into his fellow band member. Because he kills the insightful Toledo, the only one capable of understanding the oppressive dynamics causing his suffering, the act is tantamount to Levee's *self-destruction* and, in a larger sense, to race suicide (141; emphasis added).

The murder of Toledo is the tangible result of Levee's self-destruction. Even though in an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson asserts that none of his characters hate themselves, Levee is experiencing some self-hatred since he kills Toledo, who represents both "Africa" and the African-American community (175). Levee, in his self-destructive state, kills the band member who is most for black advancement.

Defining the Consequence of Displaced Violence

When Levee kills Toledo, Levee does a disservice to the entire African-American community, because he slays the intellectual of the group (Elkins 45; Moyers 179). Levee did not just kill an intellectual, he killed a man who was thoughtful about social, *communal* issues. If, like Ma, Levee had embraced the blues, he would have been better able to deal with Sturdyvant's rejection because he would have had the strength of *an entire community* on which to depend. Levee refuses "to recognize that his individualism cripples him by refusing to understand how *he is scarred in spirit, not just body*," writes Philip E. Smith II in his article, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Playing the Blues as Equipment for Living."

> Levee has nowhere to turn but to himself when he rejects the traditions and strategies of the blues people. *He cannot bear the tremendous weight of his own rage*, and with his strategy of selling himself to the white man exploded and betrayed, Levee is left without Ma's strength of heart and her spiritual authority; *he can only bring down a more valuable man as he caves in upon his own inauthentic self* (184; emphasis added).

By rejecting his African-American and African past, Levee is left with nothing.

The effect of Levee's displaced actions was the destruction of two black lives—his and Toledo's. Nobles illustrates Toledo's function in Africa and the African-American community:

> In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Toledo serves as the Arokin/historian. He introduces "meaning." Through Toledo's voice, Wilson is able to illustrate the deeper meaning or significance of *the relationship between the individual and the community*. Toledo reminds the audience of the deeper meaning. He points out the significance of the African "bonds of kinship" that reside in the memory and social conduct of African Americans (86; emphasis added).

In other words, Toledo functions as the "ancestral voice" (88). Toledo dies at the hand of another black person in order for Wilson to hammer the point home to his audience that for African Americans a connection to community is crucial. Therefore, engaging in displaced violence *within* the community will only sever this connection, which is fatal.

Toledo was about improving the status of Blacks, while Levee was about improving the status of Levee. "Toledo […] is conscious too of what he perceives to be the responsibility of the African-American to working toward the political empowerment of the people," argues McKelly. "Even if it means putting aside the urge to flee from oppression in an escape that is at best temporary and at worst a disabling illusion" (149). Levee has not resisted the urge to flee from his oppression, he has flown from it. Unfortunately, Levee does not realize how this fleeing is crippling him. Conversely, Toledo wants to empower Blacks, encouraging them to not run away from the past and the grief it holds, sounding very similar to Wilson, as he presents his message. Because Levee murdered Toledo, the most educated band member, Toledo will not be able to use his intelligence to further his race. This is Wilson urging the point that one can not progress from a wounded existence. While

bell hooks recognizes the importance of rage in revolutionary movement for social change, she also recognizes that these actions can not occur if the revolutionary in question is living a wounded existence (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 145). Levee is living in an injured reality, and this is why his actions can not be positive. If Levee would have looked at his fellow band members, like Cutler, Levee may have seen another way to handle Sturdyvant's rejection. Wilson contrasts Levee with Cutler to show how structure in one's life can pacify violent inclinations.

Defining Solutions and Alternatives

Wilson contrasts Levee and Cutler to show how spiritual structure can soothe and diminish the urge to engage in displaced violence. Levee and Cutler are spiritual antagonists, with Cutler embracing the church and Levee rejecting it. Levee is doomed in Wilson's world, because, as Shannon suggests, "Wilson emphasizes the bleak prospects of African American men who do not embrace Christianity [and] suggests that little good comes to those who totally abandon their God, regardless of how they perceive Him" ("The Good Christian's Come and Gone: The Shifting Role of Christianity in August Wilson Plays" 131). Wilson recognizes the importance of embracing something larger than us (Reed 95).

Levee's rejection of God occurred when Levee began running from his past and his community. Levee's denigration of the African-American church, God, and all things religious highlights his isolation from his people and himself. He refuses to connect with a world greater than his own, an infinite world; this action is ultimately self-destructive (Herrington 38). When Levee witnessed his family being destroyed, he turned his back on God, as he believed God had turned His back on Levee's mother. He believes that he can find success without God.

Cutler believes the opposite. His connection to the church makes him "sensible," as Wilson describes him in the stage directions (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 431). The church gives Cutler some direction and structure. Levee and Cutler's arguments focus mostly on religion. Cutler is immensely religious. His father was a deacon in the church, and he often evokes God's name. He calls Levee the devil when Levee blasphemes (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 439). When Levee begins to denigrate God, Cutler tells him that "ain't nothing gonna work for you", implying that God has control over human destiny (457). Levee and Cutler also come to blows over Cutler's devotion to his God. After Levee says that God hates niggers, Cutler attacks Levee, saying, "That's my God!…You wanna blaspheme my God!…You worthless…talking about my God!" (507-508). It is Cutler's God, it is Cutler's religion, and both are very important to him. Being Black in America does not afford Cutler much political weight, but it is through his connection to God that Cutler is able to latch on to something bigger than himself, something with a larger purpose. Also Cutler's religion (with its inherent moral code) gives him some boundaries that allow him to live a good life. The church is a part of Cutler's past; it is what he knows, and he embraces it.

Levee's lack of faith in a higher being is significant, because it is harder to lose control when there are boundaries. Levee does not realize, as Cutler does, that a relationship with a higher being might give his life more definition and control in a world where Blacks, for the most part, lack any real control. While Levee's faithlessness did not directly lead to his actions, it did make the path to violence easier to follow.

Wilson is not presenting an *inter*-community conflict, between black and white, Herrington argues, but rather an *intra*-community conflict, between Cutler, Levee, Ma, and the other band members. This conflict, she argues, provides:

> greater resonance for contemporary audiences. Wilson's focus, then, is on more psychologically complex characters. They face a kind of oppression that is comprised of external and *internal* forces. The characters in Wilson's plays are struggling to define themselves as individuals and to understand their place in the world. It is only through internal change that they can successful face external affliction (33; emphasis added).

Wilson's audience realizes that Levee cannot battle Sturdyvant's abuse, which is an external affliction, because he has not deal with his own abuse from his own past, which can only be dealt with through internal change. If Levee had been able to depend on the band members and/or Ma for support, he would have been better able to deflect Sturdyvant's rejection. Although Sturdyvant is a major source of Levee's pain, Wilson is trying to show his contemporary audience (specifically African Americans) that removing the Sturdyvants of the world is not going to remove the repressed rage that can result from oppression in American society. African Americans have to deal with their suppressed black rage, as a community, in order to prevent it from violating the community. African Americans also have to work on themselves, together as a community, using the strength from the present and past to become whole in the future.

While Wilson shows the impetuses for Levee's annihilative and displaced actions**,** he also requires that Levee take responsibility for these actions: After the murder Cutler tells Slow Drag to get Irvin, who will most likely call the police (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom 520). Levee will be held accountable for his actions, no matter their origin.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is a cautionary tale to African-American audiences about the dangers of oppression and rage: Do not run away from your past, do not depend on your oppressor to help you climb out of oppression, understand your black rage, embrace a higher power, and depend on your community.

Chapter 3: *The Piano Lesson (1936)*

Introduction

The Piano Lesson, set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1936, is the first of two plays in Wilson's cycle that focus on the African-American family. With this play, Wilson suggests that only through acceptance of a family's experiences, both good and bad, and the power that is derived from long-gone family members can African-American families move bravely into their future, healing old wounds. Although this play makes use of the past, it does not go back to Africa; rather, the play finds its strength and its history by the more recent, southern, African-American family tree. Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon argues that he uses his two protagonists (Berniece and Boy Willie Charles) to "agitate black Americans who regard without feeling or simply ignore vestiges of their past in their desperate pursuit of an American Dream that has historically excluded them" (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 148). This is Boy Willie's problem—he is willing to sell his soul to the European-American man, in order to achieve his American Dream. Berniece's problem complements Boy Willie's—she ignores her past because it holds painful memories. The two characters express dialectic (a necessary connection between two different positions) rages. Through their story, Wilson encourages his audience to realize the power of its past and to be careful of the future it claims. In order to dramatize this minefield, Wilson structures the play as a conflict between two siblings. At the crux of this battle is the family's piano.

The struggle over the piano and its catalytic connection to black rage symbolizes the necessity of realizing the value of one's heritage. The piano is at the

center of both Boy Willie and Berniece's respective expressions of rage, in that Boy Willie's manifestation is realized by trying to remove the piano from the Charles home, while Berniece tries to stop him. Boy Willie rages in a physical, determined, and passionate manner, and Berniece rages in a sentimental and emotional fashion. Wilson uses their conflict to structure the action of the play and to dramatize two differing approaches to dealing with the painful legacy of African-American history. Berniece embodies the peril of ignoring family history, while Boy Willie illustrates that revenge might not be the best solution for unifying a family. Their competing ideologies, however, are resolved in a way that suggests: revere your family heritage.

The legs of the piano are carved with Charles family events (e.g., weddings, funerals). The siblings' great-grandfather Willie Boy, a slave, had engraved these images as a subtle form of resistance. Even though slavery has been abolished for more than seventy years when this play opens, it (and its by-product—oppression) is still a major obstacle for the Charles family. Wilson's main goal is to show how slavery still impacts the African-American family, suggesting that African Americans should not be ashamed of or ignore their heritage in slavery. The piano, which is the most tangible result of the Charles family's enslavement, is not only the family's heritage, but is also the motivating factor for various family members' expressions of rage. At the base of the battle is what to do with the piano: sell it or ignore it? Neither is desirable, because the ghosts of the Charles family are figuratively and literally housed within the piano. Nevertheless, neither Berniece nor Boy Willie fully respects the piano—until the end of the play. Rage turns out to be valuable and necessary, because if Berniece and Boy Willie did not express their rage to each other, they would have never learned to revere the piano. In the end, Boy Willie and

Berniece realize that their family circumstances (along with the family's piano) do not have to be avenged or repressed; they just have to be honored.

In The Piano Lesson, the sins of the past control the present. In order to seize the future, both sister and brother must, according to theater critic Frank Rich, take a supernatural journey in history ("A Family Confronts Its History in August Wilson's 'Piano Lesson'" 245). This trek is completed and their heritage is finally embraced as Berniece calls on deceased family with a newly remembered and accepted song; these ancestors are benevolent spirits, who remind the protagonists and me that sometimes family is all we have to save us. Although the two siblings battle each other, when a mutual enemy attacks one of them, they band together (Grant 114; Pereira 103). The play suggests that family is a powerful tool that can help me navigate the obstacles to come; this is the "piano lesson."

Synopsis

The entire course of action in The Piano Lesson takes place in five days in 1936, starting on Monday morning at 5:00 a.m. in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The lights come up as Boy Willie is yelling and banging on the door of the Charles residence, where his sister, Berniece, 35, and his uncle, Doaker, 47, live. Boy Willie is 30 years old, with an infectious grin and boyish charm, as his name implies. A large man of about 220 pounds, Boy Willie has recently arrived from Mississippi, from where the Charles family originated and where he served three years' jail time for a robbery. Boy Willie has come up North to sell watermelons in order to buy some land down South. Doaker lets in Boy Willie and his friend, Lymon Jackson, who is one year younger than Boy Willie.

Berniece immediately chastises Boy Willie for making so much noise. Berniece has an 11-year-old daughter, Maretha. Boy Willie tells the family the first of several stories that involve ghosts and/or spirits. Boy Willie announces that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog killed James Sutter, the grandson of the man who owned Berniece and Boy Willie's grandfather and great-grandparents. When Berniece exits, Boy Willie talks about his plan to sell the piano. Doaker tells Boy Willie that Berniece is not going to sell the piano, which sets up the major conflict in the play.

Arguments over the piano are exchanged: Boy Willie tells Berniece that if she were using the piano for something, anything, they would not be having this yelling match; he would leave the piano alone (The Piano Lesson 51). Boy Willie argues that the piano, left unplayed, is just a hunk of wood. Berniece counters that she does not play the piano because she does not want to wake the spirits of their ancestors (70). Berniece vigorously ignores her history because she does not want to call the ancestors into her life, because she does not want to deal with the pain they would bring with them. These points of dispute are also the play's climactic plants, which drive the action of the play to the perception shift, when Berniece embraces her history and uses the piano.

Three days later, fifty-six-year-old Wining Boy, so named because he drinks a lot, arrives at the Charles household. Wining Boy, who is Doaker's older brother, tells the family that he went to the spot where the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog were born, to obtain some strength. This is the fourth plant in the play, alluding to the power of the ancestors, and the necessity of calling on them in times of need. Berniece will do this at the end of the play. Wining Boy asks Boy Willie about his and Lymon's imprisonment on Parchman Farm, where earlier Wining Boy and

Doaker were also imprisoned. The four men's imprisonment highlights the social climate for African-American men in the early 20th Century.

On the following day, Avery, a thirty-eight-year-old local preacher asks Berniece to marry him for the umpteenth time, and, once again, she refuses. Avery accuses her of carrying around Crawley's ghost; Avery tells Berniece that, it is time to let go. His advice is the fifth plant (not counting the climactic plants), pointing to Berniece moving into the future at the end of the play. Berniece is not ready to live with her family history at this point in the play. Several hours later, Berniece and Lymon discuss relationships. At the end of the discussion, he kisses her, and she kisses him back, then she breaks away. Although Berniece is not ready for a man, because she is still holding on to/repelling Crawley, she now acknowledges that she is closer to being ready. Like the fifth plant, the sixth prepares the reader for Berniece's eventual progression at the end of the play.

The next morning—Friday—Lymon and Boy Willie begin to move the piano. In order to stop Boy Willie, Berniece gets Crawley's gun. As the fighting continues, the ghost of Sutter makes his presence felt. Avery exorcises the house, and Boy Willie ridicules him by denouncing Sutter's ghost. Sutter chokes Boy Willie, who challenges Sutter to a real battle. Boy Willie and Sutter do battle upstairs, while Avery tells Berniece that his exorcism is not working. According to Wilson's stage directions, "From somewhere old, […] Berniece realizes what she must do" (The Piano Lesson 106). She recognizes that she has to direct her pain and grief towards Sutter and fight him, but she needs reinforcements. Berniece goes to the piano, embraces her family, and calls on them for help. This is also the perception shift from Berniece ignoring the past and the piano to embracing and using both. As

Berniece plays the piano, she finds her song—both figuratively and literally. In her song, Berniece calls on her parents, great-grandmother, Berniece, and great-great-grandmother, Esther, to battle Sutter's ghost. The sound of a train is heard, the battle upstairs is complete, and Berniece thanks her ancestors for their help, now chanting instead of singing. When Boy Willie sees Berniece at the piano, he realizes that she has figured out a way to use the piano and decides to leave it with her. As he leaves, he issues a warning: keep playing the piano or Sutter and I will both be back. Berniece's last line is the last line in the play; it is directed to her ancestors and Boy Willie: "Thank you" (The Piano Lesson 108).

Family History: Sell it or Ignore it?

The fight between Sutter and the siblings is a metaphorical one that depicts how the African-American "family" (meaning the entire community) can work together to triumph over an oppressive past (e.g., slavery) that continues to haunt the present. This victory will occur once the familial participants learn to respect and depend on the ancestors. Victory over the past is realized when Berniece transfers her rage from Boy Willie to Sutter. By the end, Berniece recognizes that Sutter, rather than Boy Willie, is the problem (Grant 114). Once she recognizes this, the rage that prevented Berniece from dealing with her past fuels her literal move to the piano at the end of the play. She moves to the piano and plays a song that allows the ancestors to run Sutter out of the Charles family home; he will stay away as long as the piano's significance is respected. When Berniece sings her song, she accepts her identity as Charles family cultural mother, who will now honor and transform the family's painful past. Once this happens, both Berniece and Boy Willie know that family history should neither be ignored nor sold.

Although Wilson uses a debate to structure his play and his characters' rages, he does not lose sight of one of his major influences—the blues. The overall structure of the play resembles a blues song, in which verses develop different ideas, but the chorus returns to the same point (Francis 14). The verses can be thought of as lines of dialogue, in which each character (Berniece, Boy Willie) explains why the piano should remain in the house, or be sold. Since Wilson encases the siblings' blues within a debate structure, there are two points of view. Because of this, a character sings a verse, then his/her chorus, then the other character sings his/her verse, and then his/her chorus. It is not until the end of the play (and debate) that both characters sing the same chorus—the piano should be used and can stay in the Charles household. But until this point, the debate follows two tracks. Boy Willie's first verse is, "She [Berniece] ain't got to sell it [the piano]. I'm gonna sell it. I own just as much of it as she does" (The Piano Lesson 12). Berniece's first verse counters, "if he [Boy Willie] come up here thinking he gonna sell that piano then he done come up here for nothing" (27). In a blues song, the chorus repeats a single idea, sometimes verbatim. In the play, Boy Willie consistently returns to the same refrain when he says: "I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part" (9). With the three parts, Boy Willie will be able to buy Sutter's land. Boy Willie repeats this chorus, in varying order, four times throughout the course of the play. This blues structure is similar to a debate, in which the first participant presents his/her point. The second responds to the initial point. Boy Willie's verses and chorus, which are motivated by his expression of rage, are the entire function of his character and his placement within the play—Boy Willie wants to sell his heritage in order to mark out a place in the

hierarchy of American capitalism. Berniece, however, is right behind Boy Willie, waiting to rebut his point. In response to Boy Willie's song, Berniece provides various versions of the following counterpoint: "I ain't selling that piano, Boy Willie. If that's why you come up here you can just forget about it" (The Piano Lesson 27).

Berniece is the true protagonist; however, since Wilson structures this play using a debate framework, Berniece's opponent, Boy Willie, deserves close to equal billing (Grant 104). In order to understand each character's argument, and where they are coming from, it is necessary to comprehend who the characters are. Both Berniece and Boy Willie are trying to progress—Berniece through Maretha, Boy Willie through the purchase of land. An understanding of the characters in this play can be achieved by answering the following questions: what is each character's responsibility to the family, how does each character misuse his/her responsibility, and what is the saving grace of this misuse?

In his article, "The Dialectics of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*," Harry Elam, Jr. thoroughly describes the complex Berniece character, and answers the question Wilson is asking with this character:

> Berniece is the protector and progenitor of the family's cultural heritage. […] Berniece controls the piano […] In her rational and persuasive arguments for keeping the piano, and thwarting Boy Willie's efforts to sell it, Berniece relies upon the history, *the legacy* of familial sacrifice, both maternal and paternal, that have carried the piano to its current resting place. For Berniece, selling the piano would desecrate her parents' memories. […] At the same time, however, Berniece seeks to avoid the memories of the past. […] As a result, she neglects her duties as cultural progenitor. It is this position that Wilson seeks to critique in *The Piano Lesson*: "the question was, 'Can one acquire a sense of self-worth by denying one's past?' [Berniece] must reconnect with the past so that she and her family might be freed from the negative psychological and sociological forces that haunt and inhibit their present. […] Berniece's refusal to release the spirit of Crawley, coupled with her particular, painful memories of the suffering that her mother endured, paralyze her and

> make her unwilling to forgive her brother, Boy Willie, or to *embrace fully the family's past*. Berniece […] is a figure of conflict and *contradiction*. She both acknowledges and attempts to ignore the impact of the past on the present (367; emphasis added).

Berniece is paralyzed and cannot embrace her family's history because of the painful memories of her suffering mother, Mama Ola. The main reason Berniece's mother suffered is because she lost her husband, Boy Charles, as he retrieved or stole (depending on your point of view) the piano from Sutter. Once the piano was back in the Charles home, Sutter and some of his friends trapped Boy Charles in a train car (along with four African-American hobos) and set the car on fire—these men then became the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog (the name of the train). After Boy Charles's death, Mama Ola lived for 17 years without a man; during this time, a young Berniece watched the pain her mother endured.

Although Boy Willie's arrival activated her rage, displaced blame was the true origin of her rage. Berniece blames the piano for her father's death and her mother's suffering, even though her mother embraced the piano as a shrine to her husband. This is why Mama Ola had Berniece play the piano for her. Berniece explains the connection between her parents and the piano to Avery:

> When my mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since. I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She used to have me playing on it…had Miss Eula come in and teach me…say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her (<u>The Piano Lesson</u> 70).

With Berniece playing the piano, Mama Ola opened the lines of communication between the living and the "living-dead" (Nobles 122). The "living-dead" is Boy Charles, who, Although he was dead, was still alive, as far as Mama Ola was concerned. When Boy Willie and Sutter are battling to the death, Berniece once

again opens those lines of communication to her parents and ancestors. In the meantime, while Berniece is able to acknowledge that Mama Ola looked to the piano as a shrine to her husband, this does not lessen Berniece's belief that the piano is to blame for her father's death. When Mama Ola dies, Berniece vows never to touch the piano again.

With this vow, Berniece cannot fulfill her responsibility as cultural progenitor. Berniece will not become a whole person until she embraces her responsibility as the Charles family's cultural mother, and she cannot do this until the rage she directs at her family history has been released. Berniece is cultural mother because she is in possession of the piano; Wilson suggests that Berniece is supposed to protect and embrace the cultural memories locked within. Unfortunately, Berniece is doing neither; in fact, she is running in the opposite direction. She keeps these negative Charles family memories locked up inside her, not sharing them with her daughter (who will become the new keeper of the memories as she represents the future), not allowing them to bolster the family. Berniece looks to the future, through Maretha, *in spite of* the past. For example, Berniece makes sure Maretha has piano lessons, not in case Maretha needs to *use* the piano for the family, but rather to facilitate Maretha becoming a schoolteacher (Hayes 256). It is the future that drives Berniece. Solely looking towards the future negates her role as the cultural mother. To highlight Berniece's neglect of her responsibilities, Wilson has Boy Willie ask Maretha if she knows the stories behind the carvings on the piano. When Maretha says "No," Boy Willie comments that Berniece should tell Maretha the family history. This exchange is the third plant in the play. Berniece needs to ignore family history, and Boy Willie needs to share particular parts of it. This is the third plant—exemplifying Berniece's

aversion to the past, and which also highlights the difference between Berniece and Boy Willie when it comes to dealing with the past.

Berniece's rage is an emotional force that prevents Boy Willie from selling the piano. This power is felt as Berniece brings up the trauma of the past, specifically as it affected her mother, to stop Boy Willie from taking the piano. Just as Boy Willie attempts to use his physical strength to get the piano, Berniece uses emotive memory to attempt to beat Boy Willie into submission, and leave the piano alone. Berniece reminds Boy Willie of the pain Mama Ola endured over losing her husband because of the piano, emotions that Berniece saw more clearly than Boy Willie, since she spent more time with her mother. Berniece tries to convince Boy Willie to accept her argument by tugging on his emotions, wailing about Mama Ola's anguish, and how selling the piano would sully their parents' love.

Unfortunately for Berniece, Boy Willie does not respond to this tactic. He is not led by his emotions, as Berniece is. Although he wants to avenge his father, he rarely mentions the *emotional* past. Berniece's contradictory rage ("I hate the past." "We need the past in this house.") only feeds Boy Willie's determination to use the piano for *something*. Berniece implores Boy Willie to leave the piano in the Charles house, yet she will not use it. Recognizing that the emotional angle is not working, Berniece tries another approach.

In the midst of her trying to prevent Boy Willie from taking the piano, Berniece presents a gendered argument. She does not want to feel anymore unnecessary pain, as previous female generations has; it is this fear of becoming like these women that motivates Berniece to flee the past, where so much agony is housed. She believes that as the men in the Charles family steal and die over wood,

the women are left behind to deal with the pain. Berniece explains: "You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what?" (The Piano Lesson 52). In an interview with Dinah Livingston, Wilson explained Berniece and her placement among all of the men, except Avery:

> Behind all of them men […] there are women who support them, who nurse them, who feed them, who comfort them. And without those women, they couldn't exist. Berniece is one of those women. But she never knows when she's gonna go to another burial. That's what those women do: They always bury their men. Berniece is tired of it. She does not want to be one of those women who supports those men (30).

Mama Ola was one of these women; when Crawley was alive, Berniece was one of these women.

When Berniece decides not to be one of those weeping women, she closes herself off to the pain of the past. Although grieving for Crawley, she represses this emotion, along with her connection to her own history. With this action, Berniece was not able to really *live* in the present, she was just *existing*. Her state of being is one of the plants in the play. Wilson uses this plant via the Avery character to show that Berniece is stuck—this is Avery's major function in the play. Avery tries to help Berniece with this slump when he tells her:

> At some point you got to let go and go on. Life's got all kinds of twists and turns. *That don't mean you stop living. That don't mean you cut yourself off from life.* […] You just gonna drift along from day to day. *Life is more than making it from one day to another.* You gonna look up one day and it's gonna be past you. Life's gonna be gone out of your hands—there won't be enough to make nothing with (The Piano Lesson 67-68; emphasis added).

Later, Avery tells Berniece, "You got to put all of that behind you, Berniece. […] Everybody got stones in their passway. You got to step over them or walk around them. You picking them up and carrying them with you" (70). One of the stones in

Berniece's pathway is her aversion to the piano, to disturbing the history she has suppressed. Berniece's fear is one of the climactic plants Wilson uses to move his audience to the perception shift. Berniece is closed off to her pain, until Boy Willie showed up on her doorstep, and forced her to deal with it. When Boy Willie first enters, he says that he has not seen Berniece in three years since the death of Crawley, his late brother-in-law (The Piano Lesson 2). This is the play's first plant: this three-year gap will connect to Berniece's outburst, when she attacks Boy Willie because she believes he was involved in the death of her husband, Crawley. This eruption helps to define the rage she feels toward Boy Willie and her own family history.

Although Berniece consistently runs from her female predecessors, she also recognizes that one day she might need them; this is why Berniece argues that the piano must stay in the house, even though she had no idea that she would need the piano to save Boy Willie's life. One of the reasons Berniece saves Boy Willie is that she does not want to lose another loved one and go to another funeral. Without Berniece, Sutter's ghost would have killed Boy Willie. Right before Berniece saves Boy Willie, she recognizes that these women are in her genes and that they are her destiny, as she is theirs; once Berniece accepts this fact, she can then accept the piano as a powerful tool to be used for familial enrichment. Originally, Berniece did not think she would need her ancestors, she thought Avery was enough to remove Sutter's spirit.

Ghosts and spirits are, by definition, manifestations of the past, so it is highly appropriate that they are present in this play, considering that the past is so crucial to the action. When Boy Willie first enters, he announces Sutter's death and tells Lymon he wishes he saw Sutter's ghost, so he could beat him up (The Piano Lesson

16). This is the second plant in the play, since Boy Willie will fight Sutter at the end of the play, eventually receiving help from Berniece and their family.

As Boy Willie fights Sutter, at the play's perception shift/climax, according to Wilson's stage directions, "From somewhere old, […] Berniece realizes what she must do" (The Piano Lesson 106). She must embrace her family's history—in order to save her brother and to become herself a full person. This realization is not provoked by anything dramatic—Avery simply admits that he cannot exorcise the house. Much like Loomis in Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Berniece recognizes that she has to make a connection with the past in order to move into the future. It is at this point that the fourth plant—when Wining Boy called on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog for strength—comes to fruition, as Berniece does the same thing—calls on the ancestors for power. Once this shift occurs, Berniece will be able to navigate the past while in the present.

Unlike Berniece initially, Boy Willie talks about certain aspects of the past. He looks to the future *because* of the past. His raging reaction to the past drives his desire to progress beyond his male family members. He says: "See, he [Boy Charles] couldn't do no better. When he come along he ain't had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain't had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano" (The Piano Lesson 46). Now, Boy Willie hopes to take the piano and buy some land, so he will have something to leave his son, who can then continue in the family tradition of farming the land. It is ironic that Boy Willie wants to sell his heritage, so he can leave his son (that he does not have yet) a legacy. But this issue of options is important to Boy Willie. By buying Sutter's land, Boy Willie hopes to obtain capitalist freedom from the old sharecropper model that has run throughout his

family. He expects to surpass his father by buying land, an option not available to his sharecropper father and his enslaved great-grandfather.

Although Boy Willie's actions mirror those of his namesake, Willie Boy, on the surface, Boy Willie's quest for respectability in American society is problematic. Boy Willie's goal seems very selfish, when viewed from Berniece's point of view. He knows what he wants, and how he is going to achieve his goals, and gives no thought to Berniece. He is going to avenge his male forebears, and he is not going to let anyone stand in his way. According to Elam, Boy Willie "imagines himself in a position to right the wrongs of racism that restricted his father's economic and social mobility" (364). Thus, Boy Willie's perceived selfishness can be received as revolutionary. Just as Willie Boy literally used Sutter's piano to make a statement, Boy Willie hopes to do the same thing with land. The statement, directed to White America, is "I'm taking something from you, and making it my own." In his article, "Essential Ambiguities in the Plays of August Wilson," James Robert Saunders further explains Boy Willie's goal:

> Buying a hundred acres of the old plantation is a way of getting control over the family's terrible past. The land for him functions as the carvings on the piano did for his great-grandfather [Willie Boy]. Taking something that belonged to the master and making it into his own is a means to power, a way to go on record and be somebody (9).

Boy Willie hopes to get Sutter's land as vindication for Willie Boy, just as Willie Boy carved the piano as retribution for his sold family. The difference between the two men is that Willie Boy did not have to sell a part of himself to achieve his rebellious goal. So, while Boy Willie's goal is understandable, his means are suspect, because Boy Willie is willing to sell his heritage to be somebody to the European-American man. Thus, he looks to the European-American man to help him achieve his

American Dream, meaning financial stability. Boy Willie feels that his responsibility is to get the land and take control of the means of production, instead of working the land, but he does this by tarnishing his birthright. All because he fears ending up like his father.

Boy Willie is willing to taint his heritage and destroy his sister on the path to cultural vindication. Just as Malcolm X called for racial justice for African-American men "by any means necessary," Boy Willie is determined to do whatever it takes to substantiate his father's worth. Thus, on the one hand, Boy Willie can be perceived as a heroic symbol for raging African-American men in America (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 148). On the other hand, he can be perceived as willfully ignoring the women in his family. Boy Willie's goals are male-specific, and center on his father; he never mentions his mother, which Berniece points out, "You ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama" (The Piano Lesson 52). Boy Willie focuses only on his father: "Many is the time I looked at my daddy and seen him staring off at his hands. He sitting there saying, 'I got these big old hands but what I'm gonna do with them? Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall.' [...] See now…if he had his own land he wouldn't have felt that way" (91-92).

It is admirable that Boy Willie's rage impels him to change social conditions (the remnants of slavery); however, it must not be at the expense of his family. When Boy Willie tells Wining Boy he is going to buy Sutter's land, Doaker says: "That land ain't worth nothing no more. The smart white man's up here in these cities. He cut the land loose and step back and watch you [Boy Willie] and the dumb white man argue over it" (The Piano Lesson 36). Wining Boy chimes in, "How you know

Sutter's brother ain't sold it already? You talking about selling the piano and the man's liable to sold the land two or three times" (36). Since Sutter had a brother and children, who could inherit the land if it was truly worth something, Doaker and Wining Boy present valid points with their arguments against selling the piano to buy land, but Boy Willie will not be dissuaded; instead, he ignores this cultural actuality. Instead, he uses his rage to substantiate his father's existence.

Familial Black Rage

With familial black rage, past injustices and conditions oftentimes act as an impediment in the social advancement of a family; as bell hooks suggests, familial rage is reserved for life at home–for one another (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 14). Boy Willie and Berniece's conflict is fed on homegrown rage; their battle begins once Boy Willie is within proximity to Berniece. Before Boy Willie comes back to Pennsylvania, when he was in Mississippi, Berniece's rage remains dormant, in spite of all of the oppression that hangs over the Charles family. Boy Willie's and Berniece's rage is familial because it originally causes the Charles family to splinter; however, their problem goes deeper. Their rage, motivated by the negativity of the past, prevents them from developing *as individuals* in the present. Neither character can advance because of past hindrances. Although both the familial and individual rages in this play seem negative, Wilson eventually utilizes the rage as a tool to help Berniece and Boy Willie accept their heritage, which will then help strengthen the Charles family as a whole.

Although sibling squabbles usually do not strengthen a family, Berniece's expressed rage toward Boy Willie makes her a healthier person. If Boy Willie had never returned to the Charles house, Berniece would have kept on just existing, never

becoming a full person. Boy Willie's arrival awakens her latent rage. The piano had allowed Berniece to subdue her emotions; all of this changes when Boy Willie wants the piano. Once he recognizes the value of the piano to the Charles family, Boy Willie—like Berniece—learns a lesson and becomes a better person for it. When he leaves the Charles residence, he leaves with the strength of his family. This is really where Boy Willie's rage was leading him—not just to the Charles household, to get the piano, but to the Charles family's reservoir of power. Thus, in a roundabout way, his expression of rage helped him to become a stronger person.

Boy Willie wants to avoid peonage, and he believes that he can do this if he owns land. Under peonage, an African-American man was oftentimes arrested on some bogus charge, usually vagrancy (as is also seen in Joe Turner's Come and Gone); he is tried and found guilty. If he could pay the fine, he would be free to go; however, this usually was not possible. In this instance, a seemingly kind European-American man would offer to cover the fine; in return the African-American man would have to work off the fine on the European-American man's land. This fine becomes a never-ending debt because the peon has to pay for room, board and washing. The fee for these services is always significantly more than the African-American man made working off his debt; thus the debt is never erased (Aptheker 31). In a post-slavery climate, European-American businessmen did whatever it took in order to obtain free labor, including bogus incarceration tactics (Daniel 21).

Wilson uses a song to illustrate this social condition. This song is an example of the oppression Boy Willie faced; this song also gives further insight into what motivates Boy Willie's rage, and stimulates his desperate need to buy Sutter's land. This need for retribution is what feeds Boy Willie's wrath, which is an unstoppable

force. The song "Oh Lord Berta," sung by Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy, and Doaker, all men who have been victims of peonage on Parchman Farm, a jail/plantation, serves as a choral opportunity to illustrate the men's respective histories. Boy Willie starts the song, in Act One, scene two, as the men drink and discuss peonage. All of the previously imprisoned men join in, stamping and clapping to keep time, singing "in harmony with great fervor and style" (The Piano Lesson 39). The men sing with passion because they have lived this song; this song tells their story; this song shows their solidarity. "Oh Lord Berta" is a song about a woman, imprisonment, forced labor, living a hard life, and dying:

> O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
> O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well […]
> Might not want you when I go free oh-ah
> Might not want you when I go free well […]
> Raise them up higher, let them drop on down oh-ah
> Raise them up higher, let them drop on down well
> Don't know the difference when the sun go down oh-ah
> Don't know the difference when the sun go down well
> Berta in Meridan and she living at ease oh-ah
> Berta in Meridan and she living at ease well
> I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah
> I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave well (39-40).

This song elucidates the oppression of peonage, especially on Parchman Farm.

By breaking down the men's song, we can get a sense of how much peonage affected the men's lives. When the men sing "when I go free," this alludes to their imprisonment. The next four lines—"Raise them up […] let them drop […] Don't know […] when the sun go down" references the forced labor. In the song the men bring up Berta's easy life, which is contrasted with their hard life on Parchman Farm. When the men talk about leaving old Parchman, they mean through death, since they never knew when their round of peonage was going to end, if ever (Daniel 20). As

performed, the song sets the mood, establishes group history, and mutual understanding of shared hardship more effectively than dialogue (Francis 14). This song seemingly erupts from nowhere; in reality, the men always carry the song and what it represents around with them. By singing "Oh Lord Berta," the men declare that they are forever emancipated from Parchman Farm.

Boy Willie's rage fuels his drive to get Sutter's land, and blinds him to the larger picture—family honor—as well as his social reality. Although Boy Willie believes he is getting this land to avenge his family, his actions are contradictory. By selling the piano, he is really selling the Charles family, just as Sutter did. This tells me that Boy Willie does not truly respect his heritage. Family history is not the only history Boy Willie does not acknowledge, he does not seem to understand American history either. Just as the expression of Boy Willie's rage—selling the piano—is detrimental to the Charles family, his rage also clouds his perception of his social reality in 1936.

Boy Willie does not fully understand the racial politics of an African-American man owning land in the South in 1936, since he refuses to acknowledge that buying Sutter's land is not as simple as producing the money for payment. Boy Willie's naïve view of this business transaction is evident when he and Lymon first enter; Doaker asks the two men what they were doing in Stoner County, Mississippi, and they reply:

> BOY WILLIE: We was down there working. Lymon got some people down there.
>
> LYMON: My cousin got some land down there. We was helping him.
>
> BOY WILLIE: Got near about a hundred acres. He got it set up real nice. Me and Lymon was down there chopping down trees. We was using Lymon's

> truck to haul the wood. Me and Lymon used to haul wood all around them parts (The Piano Lesson 5).

This quotation tells me, in the world of Wilson's play at least, an African-American man can own his own land. While this quotation is accurate as to what *could* happen in America in the 1930s, the reality is not as cut and dried as this quotation makes it out to be. Once Boy Willie conceives the idea that he can own land like Lymon's cousin and Sutter dies, he plans to sell his heritage to purchase this land down South, completely ignoring the many potential pitfalls waiting for him. As if being an African-American farmer in a pre-Civil Rights America was not enough of a challenge, Boy Willie's desire to own and work the land could not have come at a worse time, as America was still reeling from the Depression in 1936. In her dissertation, "A Critical and Historical Analysis of Five Major Plays by August Wilson," Corlis Hayes describes some of the hurdles Boy Willie will have to overcome if he is able to buy Sutter's land:

> In the 1930s the larger percentage of Negroes still lived in the rural South and most were engaged in farming and lived in abject poverty. The economic crisis [the Depression] forced Negro sharecroppers and tenant farmers to even greater economic and social disparities. [In addition] poor soil fertility, the reduced demand for agricultural labor and increased demand for industrial labor, and the general economic disorganization in the cotton areas helped speed the process of agricultural decline. [Also, one] discriminatory practice that Negro tenants and farmers faced was being charged higher prices for seed, tools, and supplies […] Negroes losing their land was common (215-218).

If Boy Willie would have looked around at the world in which he lived, he might have noticed that agriculture was no longer the cash boom it was during slavery. In addition, African-American farmers were driven out of agriculture at a more rapid pace than their European-American counterparts (218). Coming from the south, Boy

Willie probably knows African-American farmers and must have seen how hard times were for them. His goal, however, may have blinded him to their hardships.

With Boy Willie's raging tunnel vision and arrogance, he really believes he is equal with the European-American man. He refuses to see the possibility of being taken advantage of or failing. This singular focus is fed by his rage, which influences Boy Willie's entire life, since getting the piano and land seem to be all he cares about. Because of this, Boy Willie can not slow down and assess the social landscape. Demonstrating that he does not understand American racial politics, Boy Willie says to Lymon and Wining Boy, "Ain't no difference in me and the white man" (38). Boy Willie ignores reality because he has to believe that he can be a success, Boy Willie must believe that Sutter's brother will treat him fairly. Elam elaborates on Boy Willie's delusions:

> Boy Willie's attitude […] appears naïve, unaware of the ways in which race and racism continue to intersect and inhibit the economic potential of African Americans. Aware of the history of deceptive and unethical practices that white, southern landowners used against African American farmers, Boy Willie's uncles, Wining Boy and Doaker, are extremely skeptical of Boy Willie's proposed purchase. […] Doaker attempts to make Boy Willie aware of how even land sales become racialized. […] Unconvinced, Boy Willie still intends to own and operate his own land (364-365).

Boy Willie ignores how racism impacts commerce as he deals with the contemporary Sutter. Boy Willie does not seem to realize that African-American farmers in the 1930s were oppressed because of the connection between race, racism, and economics, just as the creation of the carved piano, which is at the center of his debate, resulted from the same situation. Willie Boy carved the piano as an expression of his rage because his wife and son were sold—an example of the correlation between injustice and business.

Willie Boy could not prevent his family from being broken up and sold, but he could honor their memory and resist Sutter with the piano's carvings. Elam explains how slavery damaged the African-American family:

> the value of the piano was literally equated with that of the family. Property relationships in slavery undermined kinship relationships and eroded African and African American definitions of family. The economics of slavery constantly disrupted and uprooted the black family, the preexistent and "normal" relationships of nurturing, fatherhood, and motherhood. The current crises and fragmentation of the African American family still bear the scars of this dislocation and disregard for family structure (368).

After Willie Boy's family is sold, the nuclear family is shattered. Willie Boy cannot physically fight Sutter, so he enacts his rage through a more cunning—artistic—expression of opposition. Willie Boy's carving is not only insubordinate, but it also helps him avenge his fractured family. Although crushed, Willie Boy is able to exact a small victory over Sutter:

> After the dislocation of his family and the economic exchange of "property," Willie Boy, at the behest of Sutter, carves the aforementioned portraits of the Charles family onto the legs of the piano. Yet Willie Boy subversively exceeds Sutter's request. He personalizes the piano […] Willie Boy's carvings transform the piano into a contoured family album. […] In this way, he re-members his family and undermines the request of the slave master Sutter (370).

Thus, Willie Boy empowers himself and implicitly expresses the Charles family's agency (370). Even though Willie Boy could not directly retaliate against Sutter, he could and did find subtle ways to express insubordination to declare his humanity and feed his soul.

The carving is how Willie Boy dealt with his shattered family. Connecting subjugation and rage, bell hooks argues that:

> white folks have colonized black Americans, and a part of that colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the

> targets of any anger we feel about racism. […] many of us [African-American people] were taught that the repression of our rage was necessary to stay alive in the days before racial integration (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 14).

If Willie Boy had attempted to prevent the breakup of his family, he would have been killed. Willie Boy's carving is an example of his resistance to ownership. Slaves engaged in many forms of similar opposition to declare their rage. African-American history scholar Saidiya Hartman states: "The everyday practices of the enslaved encompassed an array of tactics such as work slowdowns, feigned illness […] the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation […] that document the *resistance* to slavery" (51; emphasis added). These subversive strategies are called "stealing away," which Hartman explains as slave rebellions such as: moving without permission, maybe to see a friend or loved one; collectively assembling, oftentimes for religious purposes; or laughing and talking with friends. These actions allowed slaves to express their pent-up anguish. To steal away, no matter how small the action, was an act of fighting back that defied the master and the entire system of slavery, opposing the very notion of the slave as property (67; "The Dialectics of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*" 370-371).

The wrath that motivates Willie Boy to carve the piano is similar to the ire that leads Berniece to play the piano at the end of the play, thus freeing the pained state of *her* captive body and soul. This recuperation is fitting, since Berniece's song was bought and paid for with Willie Boy's resistance. Vera Lynn Nobles, in her dissertation, "Emi: The Concept of Spirit in Selected Plays of August Wilson," discusses the value of Willie Boy's actions: "The carver actually put his Emi (essence) into the work as he used his memory and love to transfer the images of his family onto the piano" (121). By carving the piano, Willie Boy marks it as his

territory, and upsets the semantics of ownership and property ("The Dialectics of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*" 370). Although Sutter owned Willie Boy, and Nolander [the man who bought Willie Boy's family] owned Berniece and their son, by taking control of the piano Willie Boy stakes his familial autonomy. Willie Boy carved in order to contest Sutter, memorialize his family, and heal *his own* pain. With the carvings, the piano and its "songs" become the property of the Charles family; this transfer of ownership will come full circle at the end of the play, when Berniece fully claims the piano and her song and drives Sutter from the family home (370).

Conclusion

Engaging the theme of familial black rage, Wilson portrays two damaged protagonists, one who ignores her history, and another who is determined to beat the past at any cost. They each come to learn how to respect his/her heritage, represented by the piano that has moved throughout three generations in the Charles family. Berniece does not respect the piano and has not touched it since her mother died, because the past, including a husband and father's unnatural deaths, is too painful for her. The past is also painful for Boy Willie; he becomes an African-American man driven to prove himself equal to the European-American man. Boy Willie intends to achieve this goal by selling his family history. Wilson shows me that both solutions—to sell or shun one's heritage—are problematic; instead, he advocates embracing the past in order to navigate the present and future.

The black rage in this play is distinctive because it is productive and healing, soothing the rift between siblings. Familial spirits quell the acrimonious relationship between brother and sister. Berniece and Boy Willie respect and embrace their heritage, as both recognize that the piano must remain in the Charles home and be

used. Once the play is over, Berniece will thrive as "cultural mother," as she continues to teach Maretha both piano lessons and Charles family history lessons. With this new worldview, Berniece will bestow in Maretha a sense of family that will strengthen Maretha as she moves into the future. The daughter's future is bound to Wilson's message—do not sell your family history, do not ignore it, but rather use it to fight your contemporary battles.

Chapter 4: *Seven Guitars (1948)*

Introduction

As in Wilson's earlier plays, the past and its connection to self-image are tied up, tangled up and bound up in issues of black rage in Seven Guitars, which is set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in spring 1948. As in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and The Piano Lesson, Wilson does not go back to Africa as he mines the past in this play, but rather examines an influential relationship between a dead father and his son (Hedley), depicting how family history can resonate precariously for successive generations. Unlike The Piano Lesson, in which the familial past eventually brings the Charles family together, Seven Guitars places seven characters—the seven guitars in the title—on a destructive path, fueled by black rage, which ends with a murder mystery (Rosen 20, 26; Lahr 99; "August Wilson's Gritty Guitars" 60; Weber 7).

How does black rage and confusion over one's identity foster violence? Wilson oftentimes uses rage to propel his characters on a quest for their identity; however, if the character is question is confused about his/her identity, the rage lurches out of control, leading to misdirected actions. As with Levee (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom) and Boy Willie (The Piano Lesson), this manifestation of black rage is rooted in ambition: African-American men trying to be somebody, one trying to be a music star (Floyd) and one trying to avenge and satisfy his dead father (Hedley). This relationship between a father and his too-eager-to-please son, rooted in a song called "Buddy Bolden Blues," sets the stage for the protagonist (Floyd) and antagonist (Hedley) either to change or get lost in the socially dictated identities that encourage their rage and ultimately lead to murder. The consequences of Hedley's black rage,

so directly linked to his father, is distinct from Levee's in that the latter was not confused about his identity, as Hedley is; Levee just chose the wrong path to achieve his goals.

Although both Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Seven Guitars use destructive presentations of rage, these examples drive home Wilson's message to the African-American audience: Embrace the past and know who you are. Hedley compares himself to Joe Louis (1914-1981), declaring that he wants to emulate him, instead of realizing who Hedley is. Hedley's displaced violence and Floyd's end-of-the-play criminal activity are the consequences of expressing black rage when either one does not know one's identity or when one allows society to control who he/she is, for the sake of being successful. With both Floyd and Hedley engaging in activity that is the antithesis of healing rage, Wilson's moral is "Do not let others define you." This ideology is communicated not only in Wilson's plays, but also in his cultural criticism.

In June 1996, when Wilson presented his speech, "The Ground On Which I Stand," to the Theatre Communications Group's Eleventh National Conference in Princeton, New Jersey, he called for fully funded African-American theaters for African-American actors, directors, and other theater practitioners (16). Wilson argued that:

> for a black actor to stand on the stage as part of a social milieu that has denied him his gods, his culture, his humanity, his mores, his ideas of himself and the world he lives in, is to be in league with a thousand nay-sayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his heart. To cast us in the role of mimics is to deny us our own competence (72).

Wilson is critical of color-blind casting and calls for a separatist theater (even though his plays are produced in European-American theaters) because African Americans

cannot be true to themselves or to their African spirit if they are playing European-American characters, if they are attempting to be European-American ("Plea Heeded for Meeting on Black Theater" B1). In situations like these, African-American actors, working within a European-American infrastructure, give too much power to those European Americans in control, meaning the playwright, director, producer, etc. Wilson declares that it is dangerous to allow others, especially if they are your oppressors, to determine who you are. Wilson is not advocating that self-determination happens in a vacuum, but rather it must begin with being true to yourself, not someone else. This is the journey Hedley and Floyd take as they forge their futures.

Unlike most of his other plays, Seven Guitars' use of an ancestral spirit does not lead to revelation or epiphany, because of Floyd and Hedley's disoriented identities (Weales "Seven Guitars" 567). Seven Guitars is a play about the past creeping into the present, not to solve problems or skirmishes, but rather to create them. Instead, the sins of the father create catastrophic results for many characters in the play.

Wilson demonstrates once again how self-image connects to rage and influences action. Following Jorge Luis Borges's storytelling model, Wilson presents us with the results (read: ending) of a story and then takes us on a "backward journey," so we can understand how the characters wound up where they did. This design more easily allows Wilson's audience to ascertain his major points. If we know Floyd is going to die, we watch his interactions with other characters and wonder, "Is that action going to stimulate someone's rage, and lead to Floyd's

death?" Bruce Weber, in his article, "Sculpting A Play Into Existence," explains that the play was not always set to follow Borges's model:

> The narrative, told in flashback, is the story of how Floyd's ambition undoes him. Though in form a murder mystery—Who killed Floyd? is the question that drives the story—the play was not conceived that way. At first, the death was not foretold; it just happened at the end. The change gave the narrative some needed momentum (7).

Using Borges's usual ground plan made Seven Guitars a more effective play. Wilson echoes Borges by presenting the results of the rage first, and then leads me through the motivations for the rage. Wilson told interviewer Mark William Rocha about Borges's storytelling: "It's the *way* Borges tells a story. In Borges, it's not what happens, but *how*. A lot of times, he'll tell you what's going to happen up front, […] All of the interest is in how the story is going to be told" ("A Conversation with August Wilson" 31). It is not as important to know that Floyd is murdered as it is significant to understand how black rage led to his death. Throughout the entire play cycle it is paramount that we understand the why and how of a character's actions, as opposed to realizing just what he/she does. As a result, yes, Hedley murders Floyd, but *why* he does it is the real issue. Hedley's rage is stimulated throughout the play, when he or his dead father are not respected, when he rails against the African-American man's placement in American society, when his goals in White America are impeded. Wilson effectively presents these reasons for provoked rage and their actualization, as he imitates Borges.

Wilson scholar Joan Herrington points to another convention that Borges and Wilson share: "In much of his work, Borges portrays man as being buried by the weight of everyday reality, blind to a larger, richer version of possibilities, and therefore incapable of living a full and free life" (38). This archetype sounds like

both Hedley and Floyd, especially in relation to their drive to be somebody ("buried by the weight of everyday reality") at the expense of their identity ("blind to a larger, richer version of possibilities, and therefore incapable of living a full and free life"). Wilson uses this problem, as he tells Hedley and Floyd's story, to illustrate the play's message, which is a cautious one—do not allow oppressive conditions to determine and foster your identity or resultant conduct. Although similar to that of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, this moral differs in that Wilson did not write Levee as confused. Levee makes deliberate choices. In contrast, Hedley and Floyd (Hedley more so than Floyd) passive-aggressively try to achieve their goals. Neither Floyd nor Hedley is able to move forward, literally or figuratively.

Synopsis

Seven Guitars begins in the backyard of a house in Pittsburgh's Hill District, a working class African-American neighborhood, in the spring of 1948, after the funeral of Floyd Barton, a thirty-five-year-old semi-successful blues musician who had intended to "make some more records" in Chicago. Floyd's twenty-seven-year-old estranged girlfriend, Vera Dotson, discusses his funeral with her forty-eight-year-old friend, Louise, and Floyd's friends: Canewell and Red Carter, as well as fifty-nine-year-old Hedley. Eventually, Vera plays "That's All Right," a hit record that was Floyd's only recording. The song triggers the characters' memories of Floyd, leading into a flashback.

In the flashback, Floyd and Vera are dancing. They discuss his European-American manager, T. L. Hall, whom Vera does not trust. The next morning, Floyd and Hedley, a tubercular man who is perceived to be mad, sing stanzas from "Buddy Bolden's Blues." The lyrics support Hedley's belief that Bolden is going to come to

him and give him money from his dead father. Hedley eventually gives Floyd a prophetic message—warning him that he is the pick of the litter, and the European-American man has a dangerous plot against him. Hedley warns him to not help this man with his plan. Unfortunately, Floyd will not heed this advice.

Ruby, Louise's twenty-five-year-old, sensual niece, arrives from Birmingham, Alabama. While the characters play cards, a rooster crows, and Floyd and some of the other characters threaten to kill it. Hedley kills the rooster, then leaves the yard and everyone stunned and frightened, wondering why Hedley did it.

In Act Two Hedley propositions Ruby for sex, and she refuses. Later, Hedley rants about the placement of African-American men in American society, and Ruby tries to calm him down. Hedley reacts to Ruby's intervention by kissing her violently, and Ruby allows him to make love to her. They eventually make a connection. Ruby reveals she is pregnant from some man back home. Eventually, Ruby decides that she is going to tell Hedley that the baby she is carrying is his. Ruby also decides that if the child is a boy, she is going to name him Hedley.

Floyd tells Vera two pieces of good news: Hall booked a gig for Floyd for Mother's Day, and everything is set for the Chicago recording session. Later, Floyd looks for Hall, and no one has seen him. Red Carter tells Floyd that Hall was running a phony insurance scam, and is in jail. Floyd is crushed by this news, but vows that he will realize his goal, even if he has to kill everyone in his way.

After his announcement, the characters worry and wonder where the missing Floyd is. Two scenes later, Floyd shows up and buries something in Vera's garden. Floyd shows Vera the new guitar he "acquired," as well as the dress he bought for her. Vera asks Floyd where has he been, since he has been missing for two days.

When she asks him where did he get the money for his new purchases, he responds that sometimes you have to take a chance, and that is what he did. Floyd also tells Vera that everything is arranged for the Chicago trip, if she accepts his offer; she does.

Canewell reveals that a botched robbery occurred, and two of the three robbers are still at large, hauling around a great deal of cash. The characters (except Hedley) go to Floyd's Mother's Day performance, which is a huge success. After the performance, Canewell notices the ground around Vera's garden was disturbed, offers to fix it, and unearths a handkerchief with $1,200 in it—this is Floyd's stolen money. Floyd sees that Canewell has found his money and tries to wrestle it from Canewell, who will not give it up until Floyd pulls out his gun. Canewell then gives him the money. Floyd says he took a chance, and the money is his. Canewell exits, as Floyd counts his money in a shaft of light. Hedley sees Floyd with the money; Hedley cannot believe his eyes, he rubs them, and then begins to laugh, as he moves towards Floyd, who he thinks is Buddy Bolden with his money. Floyd tells Hedley to get away from him, eventually pushing him to the ground. Hedley gets up and exits, as Floyd buries his money. When Hedley returns, it is with a machete, and he severs Floyd's windpipe with one blow. Hedley says, "This time, Buddy…you give me the money" (Seven Guitars 104).

Out of the flashback all of the characters are in the yard after Floyd's funeral. "That's All Right" is playing on the record player in Vera's apartment. The characters talk about how the police do not know who killed Floyd. After all of the characters, except Hedley and Canewell, exit, the two men sing "Buddy Bolden's Blues."

The Use of Song and Plants to Determine Character

The singing of Bolden's song provides Wilson the opportunity to sow some major plants, which help determine character relations and sets up characters' rage. The significance of these plants is realized during the perception shift. Wilson uses Bolden's story to elucidate the Hedley character. Charles (Buddy) Bolden (1877-1931) was a famous trumpeter from New Orleans who died in an insane asylum, alluding to Hedley's tenuous grasp on his sanity ("Unrepentant, Defiant Blues for Seven Voices" C32).

When Hedley first enters, in Act One, scene three, he sings his standard stanza, "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say/Here go the money, King,/Take it away…" (Seven Guitars 16). Later, when Floyd enters, he and Hedley engage in their usual, although sometimes varied, musical exchange, singing "Buddy Bolden Blues":

FLOYD: "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say…"

HEDLEY: What he say?

FLOYD: He said, "Wake up and give me the money."

HEDLEY: Naw. Naw. He say, "Come here. Here go the money."

FLOYD: Well…what he give you?

HEDLEY: He give me ashes.

FLOYD: Tell him to give you the money (Seven Guitars 23-24).

In this exchange, Hedley and Floyd discuss Bolden giving or accepting money to Hedley. Whether Bolden bestows or receives the money is significant as this connects to the perception shift—when Hedley's black rage is stimulated, and he murders Floyd. This entire interchange is a plant—the third one—that informs us of

Hedley and Floyd's relationship, their connection to Bolden, and their fateful encounter at the end of the play, when both characters' rage has been activated. When Hedley mentions ashes, this is also a plant since Hedley will mistake the stolen money for ash.

Wilson not only uses "Buddy Bolden Blues" to motivate action, character connections, and rage, but Buddy Bolden, the man, is as much of a ghost in this play as Hedley's father. Like the legendary Buddy Bolden, Hedley is determined to "be a big man." With this money, Hedley intends to buy a big plantation, so the European-American man will not be able to tell him what to do. Hedley's rage motivates his quest to move out of his shadows and please his father. Hedley also wants to be a big man because he believes this will make his deceased father forgive him for past transgressions. Wilson scholar Mary L. Bogumil explains the link between Bolden, Hedley, his father, and later, Floyd: "Bolden's moniker 'King' is also the name given to Hedley by his father, an admirer of the musician. Male hegemony is inscribed within this song, and each time Hedley sings the song, the connections among Bolden, Hedley, his father, and later, Floyd are announced" (Understanding August Wilson 126). Like Hedley, Floyd is also looking for power that will ensure he is not at the beck and call of the European-American man. When Floyd does not find this authority, his rage will be stimulated.

In Act One, scene four, Floyd receives yet another piece of evidence that he is useless to American society. Before the play began, while Floyd was in Chicago recording his song, he was arrested for, as he says, worthlessness, meaning vagrancy, and placed in a workhouse (Seven Guitars 7). The fact that Floyd could be arrested under these flimsy charges points to the status of African-American men in American

society in 1948, even for semi-successful musicians. While in the workhouse, he was told he would make thirty cents per hour; when Floyd attempts to collect his money, he is denied. As Floyd tells the others about his plight, Hedley enters, and Floyd sings:

> FLOYD: "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say…"
>
> HEDLEY: What he say?
>
> FLOYD: He said, "Wake up and give me the money."
>
> HEDLEY: Naw. He say, "Come here. Here go the money."
>
> FLOYD: What he give you?
>
> HEDLEY: He didn't give me nothing.

Then Canewell joins in, and states:

> CANEWELL: You tell him to give you the money. If he don't give it to you, come and see me I'll cut him for you.
>
> HEDLEY: I'll cut him myself (Seven Guitars 39).

Hedley's matter-of-fact response is a major plant of the murderous action his rage will produce at the end of the play. The fact that song turns violent, after Floyd complains about being oppressed in American society, is no coincidence since both Hedley and Floyd's respective rages are manifested because of their lowly placement within American hierarchy.

In Act Two, scene one, Floyd and Hedley engage in their usual Buddy Bolden exchange, with Hedley singing the same stanza he sung when he first entered. Hedley states that King should take away the money, as opposed to give it away, which is what Buddy Bolden (Floyd) says; this is another plant that shows Floyd and Hedley's respective roles in this Buddy Bolden presentation (70). In this instance,

King is Hedley and Buddy Bolden (Floyd) is saying, take away the money, Hedley. All of these plants lead Wilson's audience to understand why Hedley's rage is provoked and he kills Floyd (Buddy) during the perception shift.

After Hedley's rage explodes toward Floyd, when he refuses to give Hedley the money, he gets his machete, murders Floyd and utters, "This time, Buddy…you give me the money" (Seven Guitars 104). This declaration signals the perception shift; all throughout the play, Hedley's line in his and Floyd's quasi-duet is, "Here go the money." Once Hedley kills Floyd, he murmurs "Give me the money." My perception of Hedley and Floyd's verbal game changes at this point. After the murder, the game takes on a serious air. Also, when Hedley tells Floyd, "Give me the money," he engages in pro-active action. He is *doing* something for the first time, using his rage to get his plantation.

Since Hedley murders another African-American man in order to get his plantation, and Wilson is not advocating that black rage should excuse black-on-black crime, he cannot let Hedley achieve his goal. This is realized through Hedley's final encounter with Canewell. After ruminating over Floyd's funeral in the last scene (Act Two, scene 9), all of the characters, except Canewell and Hedley, exit. Canewell and Hedley stare at each other, and sit in silence. Then the following exchange occurs:

CANEWELL (*singing*): "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say…"

HEDLEY: What he say?

CANEWELL: He say, "Wake up and give me the money."

HEDLEY: Naw. Naw. He say, "Come here, here go the money."

CANEWELL: What he give you?

HEDLEY: He give me this.

(*HEDLEY holds up a handful of crumpled bills. They slip from his fingers and fall to the ground like ashes.*)

HEDLEY (*singing*): "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say…/I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say…/I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say…" (Seven Guitars 106-107).

Earlier, Hedley announced that once Buddy Bolden gives him the money, it will fall like ash, "it [the money] all come to nothing" (Seven Guitars 70). This is a plant that connects to Hedley and Canewell's re-interpretation of "Buddy Bolden Blues." Tragically, Hedley's dream, to be a big man after buying a plantation with money from Buddy Bolden, will not be realized because he believes that the money he got from Floyd is ash. Bogumil explains the significance of the ash: "Ashes are a symbol of the death of the dream [receiving money from Bolden to buy a plantation] Hedley refuses to relinquish" (Understanding August Wilson 128). Hedley's quest is dead. Since Hedley believes he does not have the money, he cannot be a big man because he cannot buy a plantation. Thus, neither Floyd nor Hedley realize their songs or their dreams because both exhibited rages mired in confusion over their perceived identities.

Neither Hedley nor Floyd find their songs. Although Hedley continues to sing "Buddy Bolden Blues" at the end of the play, as he had done all along, with Canewell simply taking over Floyd's lines in the final song, this cements the fact that Hedley still has not realized who he is.

Destructive Black Rage

hooks argues that black rage and powerlessness can (but should not) operate in tandem, as is the case with Floyd and Hedley (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 137-138). Both characters are operating from a place of weakness. Hedley's rage is

triggered because he cannot own a plantation. Floyd's rage is stimulated because he cannot be a successful musician who produces records. When characters or situations stand in the way of Hedley and Floyd achieving their goals, this is when their rage is triggered, with harmful conduct following. As in Wilson's other plays, Hedley's rage is born out of powerlessness; unlike most of the other plays, however, black rage stays stuck in its powerlessness. Like Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the major expressions of black rage in this play are destructive. Black rage can lead to violent actions, but it goes further than that here, as manifestations of black rage are also connected to Hedley and Floyd's tenuous grip on identity.

Floyd is a metaphor for many African-American musicians in the early 20th Century. Whereas he played the music and sang, Hall controlled whether or not Floyd became a musician. When Floyd's identification as a musician is taken away from him, he has nothing to fall back on, but his rage, which he misdirects. Floyd engages in criminal activity, instead of musical activity. The reason why Floyd has nothing to fall back on is that he does not go back to his past with his music. Even if Floyd became a successful musician, he would not be a powerful one like Ma. As a matter of fact, Floyd does not recognize the power of his music's roots. Floyd just believes that his music can get him things (e.g., fame, respect, Vera). Floyd never honors those who came before, or the African Americans who find solace in his music. Floyd's music is a bastardization of the blues' original intent—to uplift members of the African-American community. Jazzy blues were used to reach the popular (read: European-American) audience, not empower African Americans. As a result of World War II, European Americans had a great deal of disposable income, which could be spent on musicians like Floyd. Floyd's musical aspiration differs

from Levee's in that Floyd is neither looking for revenge against European-American society (at least until the end of the play) nor running from his African-American community, he just does not turn to them in his time of need. As a matter of fact, Floyd's rage and resultant actions are so chaotic, because his identity is mired in confusion, that he does the exact opposite. Instead of depending on his group, which might have tempered his destructive rage, he uses this energy to turn completely against the community, as witnessed by his treatment of Canewell.

Floyd does not have a communal connection with his music; instead, he places control over his musical aspirations with Hall, who represents oppressive European-American men and American society. Vera realizes Floyd's dependence on Hall is a mistake, though she has no idea this relationship will lead to Floyd's death. In Act One, scene two, Floyd prophetically tells Vera: "I ain't gonna be here long" (Seven Guitars 9). This is the play's first plant, which refers to Floyd's death realized at the end of the play. Vera's mistrust of Hall is the second plant in the play, and alludes to his role in Floyd's undoing. Floyd places his ability to be a musician—his identification—in Hall's hands. This will prove to be a mistake. If Floyd had listened to Vera's opinion of Hall, he might have lived. Vera's comment—"I wouldn't put too much faith in whatever Mr. T. L. Hall say. I ain't never known him to do nothing for you. Call himself your manager. What he ever manage?" (Seven Guitars 11)—serves as a warning to Floyd, and a plant to Wilson's reader. Vera is not the only one who warns Floyd about Hall, Canewell, the person who receives the brunt of Floyd's rage, does as well. Canewell's derogatory comments about Hall also serve as plants, pointing to the detrimental effect Hall is going to have on Floyd's life (22, 46). In spite of the other characters' concerns, Floyd ignores them, and moves

forward, placing his faith in Hall. Unlike Levee, who had his fellow band members who could have potentially served as a support system once he was rejected, Floyd does not even have this possibility. In his isolated state, instead of using his rage to empower himself and figure out who he truly is, Floyd instead lashes out at society to get whatever he can from it—in this case, stolen money.

In Act Two, scene one, Floyd tells Hedley how once again American society is keeping him from his goals—the European-American pawnshop owner will not sell him back his guitar for a reasonable price. Floyd admits that he is getting close to the end of his rope, and vows to threaten the pawn shop man with his gun, if Floyd does not get his way. All of the men in the play carry weapons, either guns or knifes. Bogumil argues that, "These black men feel they need to protect themselves, their rights as citizens, in an America that many black men fought for during World War II" (Understanding August Wilson 123). Although African-American men fought in this war, they did not necessarily reap the benefits of freedom. When African-American soldiers came back to America, many were lynched and brutalized *in their uniforms*. African-American soldiers came back to a country where segregation was still in full effect. In 1948, the land of the free was still a country where African Americans were harassed because of the color of their skin; this is why all of the male characters in the play carry weapons, to try to prevent this abuse (Lahr 99-100). Floyd's .38 Smith and Wesson is his solution for righting the wrongs against African-American men (Understanding August Wilson 123). Floyd's gun is significant when he changes identities in the play—from musician to criminal. This character change occurs because Floyd believes he has no other choice once Hall is imprisoned.

Hall's imprisonment shatters Floyd's dreams of becoming a successful musician. Without Hall, Floyd cannot get his guitar out of hock, play his gig on Mother's Day, or go to Chicago to record more records. At this point Floyd's black rage is triggered—all he wants to do is get to Chicago and become a music star, but obstacle after obstacle is put in his way. This was not a unique experience for African-American musicians in the 1940s. African-American musical artists, in a pre-Civil Rights America, were just a higher form of slave, as most musicians *had* to have European-American handlers. In his text, An Autobiography of Black Jazz (1983), Dempsey J. Travis entitles his fourth chapter "The Jazz Slave Masters." Although not as extreme, Floyd's relationship with Hall is representative of Travis's recollection of how African-American artists interacted with their white owners.

As Travis documents this precarious relationship, he focuses his attention on New York's Cotton Club and Chicago's South Side nightclubs in the 1920s-1940s. Metaphorically, since Floyd was to record songs in Chicago, it is possible he would have encountered some of the disrespect and domination to which Travis refers. The syndicate oftentimes owned the clubs where African-American performers sang and played. These mobsters ran the show as tightly as any overseer on a southern plantation. Travis explains:

> These cities [Chicago, New York, Kansas City] were controlled by the Jazz Slave Masters and some of the very best black musicians [Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Lean Horne] were their serfs. Talented jazz musicians were chained to bands and specific nightclubs and saloons in the same manner as the ante-bellum Negroes were shackled to plantations (41).

Armstrong, Ellington, and Horne were at the top of their respective games, and yet they were dominated by the European-American appropriation of African-American music. If these legends could not escape European-American control, what hope did

musicians symbolized through the semi-successful Floyd have to succeed without European-American entrée?

While famous African-American musicians, like Armstrong, Ellington, and Horne were treated badly, they were *less* oppressed than non-famous African Americans. This is why Floyd is desperate to be a music star, and he recognizes the only way he is going to reach this goal is by sticking with Hall. Travis argues: "Although jazz is a music known for its free forum, the black people who played it were never free agents" (48). Thus, Floyd needs Hall.

Floyd and Hall's relationship is a replication of "the master-sharecropper dynamic of plantation life" (Peretti 182). The master (Hall) needs the sharecropper (Floyd) to do the work, yes, but the sharecropper needs the master to *survive*. Floyd's dependence on Hall is problematic, since Hall has no vested interest in Floyd, outside of making money, which was what the musical plantation system was all about (Travis 43). Jazz scholar Burton W. Peretti argues that "In the North jazz was dominated by commercial promoters, and thus discrimination was less flamboyant and public than in the South and more related to the cold and calculating search for profits" (185). These relationships point to the importance of Wilson's contemporary message—"do not let others define you." Even though it is common to compare ourselves with others, this does not mean that a person or a group of people should define who an individual is, especially when the definer in question is the oppressor of the one being defined, and holds financial control over the oppressed. By depending on Hall, once Hall destroys Floyd's life, his rage is activated, but initially it is directed at the wrong person.

Hall's actions send Floyd spiraling away from his identity as a musician towards that of a criminal that would threaten his friend if he stood in Floyd's way of achieving his goal. As a result of his regrettable partnership with Hall, Floyd recognizes that he must occasion his own opportunity, he has to create his own starting place. Unfortunately, the new position Floyd latches onto is not rooted in the identity he wants for himself. This quandary activates his rage, which provokes him to pull a gun on his friend, Canewell. Floyd attacks Canewell because he stands in the way of Floyd realizing his identity as a musician, as he denies Floyd's his stolen money. This encounter is an example of Wilson's cautionary message to his audience—Floyd's rage weakens him, his rage becomes diseased, and there is no victory in it. At this point, Floyd does not know who he has become. Canewell cannot believe that Floyd would threaten him, but Canewell does not recognize that Floyd has lost himself—he is no longer the Floyd Canewell knew. In this moment, as Floyd becomes Buddy Bolden, Floyd says "Give me my money!" five times to Canewell in the space of two pages (Seven Guitars 102-103). When he has dropped his identity as Floyd the musician, Floyd completely embodies Buddy Bolden, the musician, including his mantra. Floyd's rage spurred him to desert his musical identity, which lead to engaging in destructive activities that threatens his community. Once Hedley's rage is triggered, he will follow a similar path.

Like Floyd, Hedley's expressions of rage are pathological. When Hedley's rage is dormant, and when he is not lost in what his father wishes for him, he appears to be a harmless, old man. Grier and Cobbs (writing circa 1968) would classify Hedley as a "bad nigger," which they define as "angry and hostile. [Bad niggers] strike fear into everyone with their uncompromising rejection of restraint or

inhibition. They may seem at one moment meek and compromised–and in the next a terrifying killer" (65). Some of Hedley's raging actions (slicing the rooster's neck with seemingly no provocation, killing a man because he did not call him by his right name) do speak to Hedley's potentially dangerous mindset.

When Hedley kills Floyd, this crime is not his first; the story behind Hedley's name demonstrates how his confusion about himself has previously activated his black rage, which led him to murder another African-American man. Hedley was named after King Buddy Bolden; this legacy is what initiated Hedley's desire to adopt the identity his father wanted for him. This aspiration plagues Hedley throughout the play. In Act Two, scene one, Hedley tells Ruby that his father, a trumpeter, named him "King" because he idolized Buddy Bolden. Hedley then tells Ruby that he once killed an African-American man by beating him to death because the man would not call Hedley "King." After the murder, Hedley decided not to tell anyone else that his name was King (Seven Guitars 66-67). This choice points to the fact that on some level, Hedley recognizes that as he tries to live for his father, his actions are intrinsically rooted to his rage, its violent results, and his relationship with Buddy Bolden.

This tale about Hedley's first murder victim clarifies three things. One, Hedley's rage was triggered because he felt that he was not being shown respect. Two, Hedley's father gave him that name, and by not using it, the man was denigrating Hedley's father's actions. Three, Hedley believes that by suppressing his real name he will not kill again. Clearly, he is wrong. Once Hedley decides he is no longer King, his energy is just directed to another wish his father had for him. Instead

of being a "King," Hedley decides to become what his father ordained—a plantation owner, financed with his father's money delivered by Buddy Bolden.

The plantation is an important symbol, which represents hope. If Hedley can get the plantation, he can become a big man. As with Boy Willie, in Hedley's mind, land equals power. But during the 1940s, the agricultural labor market was shrinking for European-American farmers, and the problem was multiplied for African-American farmers. Industrialization, as a result of World War II, was dominating the society, which did not bode well for potential landowners like Hedley. With better economic opportunities in the cities, diminished numbers of people in rural areas meant fewer acres harvested, smaller output of product, and less potential for profit (Holley 96-97). Again, similar to Boy Willie, Hedley does not acknowledge the financial reality of his quest. He only knows that he has to please his dead father, who worked someone else's land and never had any real power on a social level. Hedley wants to be the man his father worked for, so he will never have to be his father. Bogumil explains: "Hedley is simply burdened by his past. His father was always the black man, both psychologically and socio-economically, under the 'boot' of the white man […] The kicks that his [Hedley's] father administers to him in a dream are the source of Hedley's motivation to be a respected black man" (Understanding August Wilson 129-130). Hedley's drive to be a big man is rooted in his need to escape his *and his father's* powerless position as an African-American man. One way Hedley does this is by worshipping successful African-American men such as heavyweight champion Joe Louis.

In Act One, scene five, all of the characters except Ruby listen to the radio, as the Joe Louis-Billy Conn fight is broadcast, with Louis winning the bout. The

characters are ecstatic over Louis's win (Seven Guitars 51-53). When Louis won, all of the characters won. These fights are also representative of Floyd and other African-American musicians' struggle for recognition and profit over enterprising and exploitative European-American record producers and managers, like Hall (Understanding August Wilson 133). Thus, Louis's victory was not just about a fight, but rather a communal social statement. In his book, Champion—Joe Louis: Black Hero in White America, Chris Mead argues that Joe Louis was the first African American to achieve lasting fame and popularity in the 20th Century. Mead states:

> Because Louis was the only black in the white world of fame and fortune, he became the symbol of his race to both blacks and whites. To blacks, Louis was the greatest of a pitifully small pantheon of heroes. Every time he stepped into the ring against a white opponent, Louis refuted theories of white superiority. Louis's victories touched off late-night celebrations in the black neighborhoods of northern cities (xi).

Louis began to box professionally in 1934, a time when African Americans did not command attention from European Americans (ix). Louis became one of the few exceptions to this rule, thus denoting his significance to members of the African-American community.

Although Louis's actual fight at Madison Square Garden occurred in 1946, Wilson thought it was significant enough to include in the play (Lahr 100; Understanding August Wilson 133). He tells interviewer Carol Rosen:

> Joe Louis was important to black America. Every time Joe Louis would go out there and fight, what he represented was [a response to] the condition of black America, all those lynchings, the effects of all the segregation. […] Joe Louis always emerged victorious, and that gave the people something they needed to get out of bed in the morning. And they would carry that victory for a long while, maybe until the next Joe Louis victory. Then they had to go down there and say, "Yessir, boss, I do dis here," and they went out on their jobs and did whatever. But they could do it easier the next day (35).

Hedley cannot effectively emulate Joe Louis because he is not a boxer; Joe Louis used this skill to effect social change. Wilson seems to be suggesting that Hedley needs to figure out what he can do to follow in Louis's footsteps, and owning a plantation is probably not it. Hedley needs to figure out his own special skills and qualities. Being a plantation owner is his father's solution to *his* social problems.

Hedley's rage is triggered when he is denied his father's wish for him—to own a plantation. Wilson explains to Rosen why Hedley murders Floyd:

> If Buddy Bolden is bringing some money from Hedley's father, he [Bolden] represents his father's forgiveness. Also, Hedley is going to use the money to buy a plantation, […] so the white man doesn't tell him what to do anymore, to become independent, […] Hedley decides that Floyd, as Buddy Bolden, […] will not give him his money so he can buy his plantation. It means it's a betrayal of Hedley's father (28).

The perceived betrayal to Hedley's father echoes Hedley's story about the African-American man who would not call him "King," because both men disrespect his father and die at Hedley's hand. This story clarifies our understanding of Hedley's relationship with his father.

Since Hedley kills Floyd during the perception shift because Floyd/Buddy is disrespecting his father, it is necessary to examine this relationship further. In Act Two, scene three, Hedley tells Floyd why Buddy Bolden is going to give Hedley money—his father's money: Hedley's father came to him in a dream, confirming a few things. One, that Hedley is his son. Two, that Hedley's father kicked Hedley in the mouth because Hedley accused his father of doing nothing. Three, to ask for Hedley's forgiveness. Four, that Hedley's father was sorry for not forgiving Hedley for his harsh, critical words when he was a child. Five, that Buddy Bolden is coming with money for a plantation. Hedley's dream about his father is crucial in order to

understand Hedley's confusion about what his father wants him to be because it sets up his need to please his father. In Hedley's mind, his father's satisfaction will be accomplished after he receives the money from Buddy Bolden and buys a plantation. Bogumil explains Hedley's association with his father:

> Hedley's father, a poor man whose labors for the white man go unrecognized and whose pride must, at all cost, be redeemed in Hedley's mind. This plantation, a symbol of the white man's subjugation of the black man, will allow Hedley to free himself from the yoke of second-class citizen or, in his thinking, obtain his father's forgiveness (Understanding August Wilson 128).

Hedley believes he has a duty towards his father. This obligation is Hedley's distorted connection to the past. Hedley's connection to his plantation also seems reminiscent of Boy Willie's desperate need to own land to vindicate his father's memory and pain.

Hedley's desperate need to make things right with his father began with a question about his placement in American society. In Act Two, scene four, Hedley tells the women that when he was a boy, he asked his father why his father was not like Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture. Hedley asked his father, "Why you do nothing?" (Seven Guitars 86). Hedley's father's response to this question was to kick Hedley in the face, and Hedley did not speak to his father again. On his father's deathbed, Hedley attempted to apologize to his father and forgive him. Unfortunately, his father was already dead, neglected by his European-American doctor. Continuing his story, Hedley reveals that once he left his dead father, he had a dream about him. The fact that Hedley could not apologize to his father motivates his need to please him at any cost, even with violence. Hedley finishes his story, and then pulls out a machete, so he will be ready for the European-American man when he comes to take him to the sanitarium. Hedley exposing this weapon is a plant,

suggesting the murder at the end of the play. Also, this action shows Hedley's determination to do whatever it takes to achieve what his father wanted for him. This is actualized at the end of the play when Hedley believes that his dream is coming true when he sees Floyd/Buddy with the money.

In Act Two, scene eight (the next to last scene in the play), when Hedley sees Floyd/Buddy with the stolen money (which Hedley thinks is his plantation money), he approaches Floyd to retrieve his gift. Hedley believes that he will finally receive forgiveness from his father. Hedley will be able to become the plantation owner his father wanted him to be. Unfortunately, Hedley does not realize that his father cannot determine his "self-image."

Wilson's depiction of the results of Hedley's and Floyd's rage is his cautionary message. The consequences for Floyd are greater and two-fold. First, he cements the loss of his identification as a musician by becoming a criminal. Second, he loses his life because he is a crook. Hedley does not sacrifice his life, but he fails to capture what his father wanted for him and loses what little clarity he had (Rosen 27). Instead of wasting all of that time waiting for Buddy Bolden, Hedley should have been defining himself.

Conclusion

Although Grier and Cobbs would classify Hedley as a "bad nigger," hooks critiques their anachronistic view of the "bad nigger":

> Even though black psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs could write an entire book called *Black Rage*, they used their Freudian standpoint to convince readers that rage was merely a sign of powerlessness. They named it pathological, explained it away. They did not urge the larger culture to see black rage as something other than sickness, to see it as a potentially healthy, potentially healing response to oppression and exploitation (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 12).

Wilson appears to agree with hooks that rage is not *just* pathological, but rather is best used as a healthy, healing response to oppression. This does not mean, however, that Wilson's characters cannot be read as pathological, as an instructive model, as is the case with Hedley, who is both dangerous and a cautionary character.

Wilson wants his audience, specifically his African-American audience, to determine and realize their own identities, along with its resultant behavior, and recognize how this identification impacts, if at all, their black rage. Wilson uses this play to argue for not allowing European-American societal oppression to dictate whom you are and what you are *supposed* to do.

Chapter 5: *Fences (1957)*

Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement, especially the battle over integration, allows the protagonist Troy, in Fences in 1957 Pittsburgh to express openly his outrage to an American society that resists his desire to better his life. The Civil Rights Movement began with a singular goal—exposing segregationist problems—and eventually splintered into a number of different ideologies. Likewise, Fences begins with an intact family—the Maxsons—dealing with the advent of integration; ultimately, racial discrimination and rejection will fracture the family. As Troy and his family (wife Rose and son Cory) battle each other, what results? Movement—the literal or figurative propulsion of a character to a new place, whether to a new position on the job or to a new function within the family—leads the Maxsons out of familial black rage. This play's characters move, oftentimes from their father's house to the public world. For example, Troy flees his father's house under adverse conditions, forty years later, Troy drives his son, Cory, from his house, also under hostile circumstances. Wilson produces this repetitive creation using the past to impact the present, as well as music, history (integration and the Civil Rights Movement), and the African-American performance mode of storytelling.

Black rage is recuperated, not by traveling back to Africa, as Joe Turner's Come and Gone does, but instead by harkening back through an African-American family's American lineage ("Family Ties in Wilson's 'Fences'" 315; The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 91). Fences is about a family, and as such the rage rests with its members. These characters and their actions serve as a blueprint for how

contemporary African-American families should and should not deal with their rage. For example, Troy's rage induces him to run his son, Cory, from his house, just as Troy's father's rage impelled him to drive Troy from his home. As a result, families are sometimes destroyed by behavior inflamed through black rage. This conduct is oftentimes initially directed toward outside enemies, but eventually grief and pain implodes within the family, causing its members to shift and/or abandon their place in the family. The rager then takes their pent-up wrath and inflicts it on their *new* family, thus repeating a pattern. Ellis Cose argues that "Rage […can flow…] from the felt experiences of everyday life, from lessons learned in run-of-the-mill human encounters, from the struggles and disappointments of family members" (40). Although most of the rage in Wilson's plays is instigated by and/or directed toward white society, Cose suggests that black rage can affect a family as well, creating a negative model. As a result, Troy becomes what he disdains the most—his own father (Elkins 97). Wilson employs a ghost from the past and Troy's present relationship with Cory in order to indicate how the past collides with the present as well as impacts the future; all fueled by reactions to oppression (Elkins 108). By ghost, I am referring to Troy's deceased father; since I do not actually *see* this ghost, his function is psychological, and extremely important to Wilson's father-son connection.

Wilson shows how past anguish and discrimination can cruise through familial bloodlines until some family member is able to transfuse the bad blood that has been sustaining past abuses. Wilson illustrates that, in order to move into an ever-changing future, I must accept my past, whether it is good, bad or both; implicit in this acceptance of the past is a recognition of my own anger directed toward racism

and its perpetrators. Only then, with a complete and true understanding of my history, can I venture into the new world set before me as a whole person, intent on not perpetuating destructive familial examples.

Synopsis

Fences begins on a Friday night in 1957 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The first act spans two weeks; Act Two, scene two jumps six months ahead; Act Two, scene four fast-forwards two months; and Act Two, scene five takes place seven to eight years later. Fifty-three-year-old former Negro League baseball player Troy Maxson, who is a massive man with big old hands, and his best friend, Jim Bono, are returning home from their jobs as garbage men. The first plant in the play is also the first line in the play—Bono telling Troy to stop lying (Fences 1). Bono's first line responds to Troy's storytelling, of which one component is telling tall tales. I eventually discover that Troy is telling tall tales and lying throughout the play; the significance of these lies impacts Troy's marriage to his devoted wife, Rose, and jumpstarts her dissolution of their marriage. The two men enter, talking about Troy's fight for African-American men to drive garbage trucks. When Troy asked his boss about this inequality, he was told to take it to the union, which he did. Eventually, Troy's protests will prove successful, when he becomes the first and only African-American garbage truck driver in Pittsburgh in 1957. Troy's on-the-job victory will summon two memories from his past that deal with his sharecropper father—one happy (Troy's father's "Old Blue" song) and one disappointing (why Troy had to escape from his father's house). Troy's negative story about his father not only exemplifies his father's hard life, but is also an example of the storytelling/oral history that is a significant part of Wilson's cycle of history plays.

Troy and Bono discuss "that Alberta gal," a woman with whom Troy is going to consummate an affair. This affair will give birth to Troy's illegitimate daughter, Raynell. As the two men finish discussing Alberta, forty-three-year-old Rose enters. Rose has asked Troy to build a fence around the front yard, which Troy does not finish until the play is almost over. When Troy wonders why Rose wants a fence, Bono tells Troy:

> BONO: Some people build fences to keep people out…and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you (Fences 61).

The fence Troy is building becomes the most obvious use of metaphor in the play.

Although Rose asks Troy to build a literal fence, Wilson builds various metaphorical fences, which create obstacles for fathers and sons, husband and wife, and African Americans living in White America ("Bringing the Light" 320). Rose joins Troy and Bono's bantering session, which eventually leads to the ever-present topic of Troy not being allowed to cross the color line from baseball's Negro Leagues into the major leagues because of his race, according to Troy. These baseball stories are further examples of how a history can be recorded, not just in books, but with words as well. This discrimination heavily impacts Troy, which in turn affects his respective relationships with his thirty-four-year-old son, Lyons, a musician; seventeen-year-old son, Cory; and forty-six-year-old brother, Gabriel, who is mentally incapacitated.

Toward the end of Act One, when Troy announces to Rose that he has been promoted, he sings the "Old Blue" song, which was a song his father used to sing about Troy's boyhood dog, Blue. Rose responds that Troy used to have their son, Cory, sing "Old Blue", and this is the play's climactic plant (Fences 44). By the end

of the play, Cory will once again sing "Old Blue," and it will help him accept his father and release the resentment he carries around.

Cory is a high school football star with aspirations to become a college football star. Cory recognizes that football is his way out of the Maxson house and that he has opportunities (educational and otherwise) available to him that were not available to his father. In order to facilitate Cory's dream, Troy has to speak to Cory's football recruiter and sign a consent form, which would allow Cory to try out for a college football team and scholarship, but Troy is not willing to sign the form. Ultimately, Troy and Cory do battle figuratively, ideologically, and literally; eventually these battles force Cory to leave Troy's house.

Lyons, an aspiring musician, is Troy's son from a previous marriage. Troy was not a presence for the first fifteen years of Lyon's life, since Troy was in jail for murder. As with the baseball discrimination, Troy's incarceration and the actions that led to it are tied to his racial placement in American society. Troy's absence impacts his relationship with Lyons and has contributed to Lyons being a man without direction. Gabriel, a World War II veteran, has been damaged by the war, receiving a head injury, and now believes that he is the Archangel Gabriel, who will open the gates of Heaven on Judgment Day.

Toward the end of the play, when Alberta becomes pregnant with Raynell, Troy tells Rose about the affair and the impending birth. Troy's affair and Alberta's pregnancy trigger Rose's rage. Six months later, when Alberta dies during childbirth, Troy asks Rose to raise Raynell, which she does, but she tells Troy that their marriage is over. Seven or eight years later, Troy dies. Although Wilson does not reveal how

Troy dies, it appears that a heart attack killed him. The playwright does indicate that Troy died as he lived—swinging a baseball bat.

On the day of Troy's funeral, Rose recognizes and helps Cory understand that she made a mistake giving her entire self to Troy—she should have kept a part of herself for herself. Cory, who returned home for Troy's funeral, is now a corporal in the Marines and with the help of seven-year-old Raynell and the "Old Blue" song finally makes peace with his father. The play ends as Gabriel does a dance, which "opens the gates of Heaven," allowing Troy to enter and find reconciliation.

Rage and The Civil Rights Movement

Placing Fences within a historical context elucidates why rage is/was an appropriate response for contemporary African Americans/Blacks in the 1950s and 1960s. What was significant about 1957? In 1957, President Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights act since 1875. This act, which was passed by Congress on August 29, guaranteed African Americans the right to vote and gave the federal government more power in ensuring that these rights were enforced (Sloan 41; Harley 274, 278, 290; Katz 451, 472; Pereira 36). It also gave legal endorsement to protesting discrimination (Pereira 36). According to historian Sean Dennis Cashman, the 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts, along with its reforms and the legislature, "'produced among blacks […] a growing *rage* toward all temporizing. […African Americans realized…] that segregation and discrimination, however wrong and unconstitutional, would cease only when blacks themselves acted massively and militantly enough to guarantee […that Jim Crowism would end]'" (137; emphasis added). This rage was a result of the ongoing civil rights struggle,

and will explode into Black Power in the next chapter, which deals with Two Trains Running.

The simmering but not yet triggered black rage propels the Civil Rights Movement, just as various Maxson family members' rages launch them to new places. I maintain that the play's action follows the ideological progression of the Civil Rights Movement from the presentation of a united front to a splintering of people and ideas.

Rage, which is a necessary part of the resistance of the Civil Rights Movement, can inspire courageous action (16), action that changes the entire social structure of a country. Another way that rage can be used in a positive fashion is to use it to feed a passion for justice (13). Activated black rage is seen throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and thus serves as the movement's foundation for social revolution. Cashman explains that it was during the 1950s that African Americans began to stand up for themselves by directly confronting and disrupting groups and institutions that were responsible for their oppression. Cashman argues that African Americans have always been angry in America; however, in the 1950s, African Americans' anger metamorphosed into rage, which led to social action (122).

In his text, African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights, 1900-1990, historian Sean Dennis Cashman argues that the Civil Rights Movement can be broken down into five phases. The first phase of the Civil Rights Movement was the "exposition" period (1945-1954), which revealed the problems of segregation and disenfranchisement, as well as *two* of the solutions—desegregation in education, as epitomized by Brown v. Board of Education, and integration in the military. The second, "developmental" period (1955-1960) began with Martin Luther King, Jr. and

non-violence demonstrations. The Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 came out of this period. Third was the "dramatic" period (1961-1965), when tragedies were overcome and triumphs were noted. This is the period of the Great March on Washington (August 28, 1963), a coming together of African and European Americans, and civil rights legislation of the Great Society, including the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The dramatic period is pivotal because it appears to be the end of the Civil Rights story because of the major victories. In reality, the movement was not completed, it just shifted gears, partly because of the dramatic period's victories. The fourth phase of the Civil Rights Movement was the "transitional" period (1965-1968), which arose out of the battle between separatism and integration, and was representative of confrontations, like the Selma March in March of 1965. This period ended in the shift from Civil Rights to Black Power, as well as the Civil Rights Acts of 1968. These conflicts inspired protests by students and women. Last was the "fragmental" period (1969-1974), which showed a Civil Rights Movement that had splintered into a variety of movements, including Pan-Africanism in the 1970s (Cashman 98-99).

Fences in Five Movements

I argue that this five-stage breakdown of the Civil Rights Movement could also be applied to Fences. Although Fences is a two-act play, I will use the progression of the Civil Rights Movement to explicate the ideological action in the play. Whereas I can use the Civil Rights Movement to interpret the action, it is not necessary that the two parallel each other in a strict chronological fashion. The *ideas* of the Civil Rights Movement should elucidate the *ideas* of Fences. The "exposition" period also refers to the play's exposition, specifically Troy's past, and his

relationship with his family. During the "developmental" period, problems, both familial and societal, are exposed. Rose and Cory have the choice of following a very flawed Troy, or breaking out on their own during the "dramatic" period. The "transitional" period illustrates the battles between Troy and Cory and Troy and Rose, as a result of the choices characters made during the "dramatic" period, including moving from out of Troy's shadow. The "fragmental" period shows the Maxson family in different, isolated areas until Troy's funeral reunites the family.

The "exposition" period of the Civil Rights Movement connects quite simply to the exposition of the play, including Troy's on-the-job battle for integration, and Troy's relationship with Cory and his own father. This parental information will clarify Troy's later harsh treatment of his own son. During the "developmental" period, both Cory and Troy present their respective solutions for dealing with the problems (black rage/discrimination) revealed during the exposition period. Troy is going to fight for integration on his job, while Cory is going to use football to surpass his father's life. It is during the "dramatic period" that I realize that Troy and Cory have different ideologies about being African American.

During the "transitional" period, confrontations occur between Troy and Rose, and Troy and Cory; these confrontations arise out of the three characters' differing ideas. Integration is a large part of the difference between Cory and Troy, as Cory sees a future full of possibilities, while Troy has closed himself off to a positive future. Troy and Rose's differing ideologies rest in spousal responsibilities. Troy tells Rose he participated in an affair with Alberta because Alberta allowed him to realize his wants and needs, while Rose tells Troy *she* placed all of her needs in *him*.

In the play, this fourth period terminates with change—Cory running away the Maxson house and Troy, and Rose stating that her marriage to Troy is in name only.

One of the challenges facing Rose is being a woman in the midst of this vast social change. Further supporting my argument that Fences progresses concurrently with the Civil Rights Movement, I suggest that Rose's placement in the Maxson family mirrors African-American women's placement within the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and points toward the burgeoning Women's Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The last "fragmental" period shows a fractured Maxson family—Troy is dead, Rose is in the church, Lyons is in jail, Cory is in the military, and Gabriel is in an institution (Savran 301). Although initially fractured, by the end of the play, the entire Maxson family, with the help of Troy's spirit, will be able to re-group and proceed, facing the changing society in front of them—something that neither Troy nor his father was ever able to do.

Black Rage

Troy claims he was not allowed to play Major League baseball because of his race, but Rose claims it was because of Troy's age. Both might be incorrect—Troy might have been the *wrong type* of African-American man. Troy is not a passive character, on any front. He could not have taken Jackie Robinson's place as a baseball/racial trailblazer because of his lack of tact (racial or otherwise) (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 97-98). About Robinson, Negro Leagues scholar Donn Rogosin declares:

> Robinson was viewed as a special kind of black man. He was supposedly more intelligent, more moral, and more disciplined than other black ballplayers, and therefore more deserving of inclusion in the major leagues. Perhaps the choice of Robinson was a wise strategy at the time. Robinson's

> UCLA connections and his articulate, sensitive demeanor won […] the battle of public opinion. However, this choice was a great disservice to the other Negro league players (176-177).

Since Robinson was not the best African-American baseball player, his ascension to the major leagues was a "disservice to the other Negro league players." Troy could have been as good a ballplayer as Robinson, but baseball skill was not the only requirement to cross the color line; the African-American man who did this had to be non-threatening to Whites. Troy did not understand the social difference between himself and Robinson. The first African-American man who participated in White America's national pastime could not sully it with black rage; Troy was too busy raging, albeit ineffectively, to be a part of this milestone. Thus, Troy's black rage impacted his entrance to the Major Leagues and his relationship with his family, specifically Cory.

Character conflict arises out of differing ideologies; the crux of the Cory/Troy conflict rests in that these two men come from different eras. These differing viewpoints set up the characters' polar attitudes, as Troy's past is filled with a lack of opportunities, various disappointments, and an abundance of oppression. In contrast, Cory's future is full of opportunities. Unlike his father, Cory has not faced a lot of disappointment and oppression, and thus does not rage at American society, like his father. While Troy cannot change, Cory is willing to give America a chance.

While some were able to benefit from integration (Jackie Robinson), others were left behind because of it (Troy); although Troy is disillusioned and angry, this displaced rage is not directed at the responsible parties, but rather at those inside his family ("Wilson's 'Fences.'" C17). While Troy impotently criticizes baseball and the White America that held him back, the actions and consequences of his raging impact

the wrong people—his family, primarily Cory. Generally speaking, attacking baseball is not going to facilitate Troy's vindication against his oppressors. Wilson scholar Kim Pereira argues, "In venting his anger on athletics, Troy is actually turning against himself. Like Levee, he attacks the source of his identity and, in seeking self-empowerment as a free human being, becomes a slave to bitterness" (41). In other words, it would be more productive for Troy to assault the specific people who held him back, rather than the entire baseball brotherhood, of which he is a member. In Act One, scene three, Troy tells Rose he does not want Cory to be like him, referring to his love of sports; there is a degree of self-hatred in Troy's statement, which impacts his family (Fences 39).

bell hooks argues that rage in the African-American community is reserved *for* the community; in other words, the most likely group to suffer the aftermath of displaced black rage are other African Americans, partly because the races in American society usually live amongst themselves. hooks's "proximity equals opportunity" argument becomes heightened when looking at a family like the Maxsons (Killing Rage: Ending Racism 14). It is easy for Troy to direct his shots at his family since they are right there, within close range. When not accurately but ineffectively blaming the white society that oppressed him, Troy's rage is indirectly inflicted upon: Rose, Lyons and Gabriel, and directly inflicted upon Cory. Troy does not recognize how the outcome of his black rage is affecting his family, including Rose.

African-American Women's Rage

Although Berniece (in The Piano Lesson) and Ma Rainey (in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom) are two women who drive narrative in Wilson's plays, Rose is not one

of these women. One of Rose's major functions is to act as mediator between Troy and Cory; Rose also serves as the voice of truth when Troy begins another tall tale. In 1965, Rose tells Cory about Troy and her 1940s and 1950s' self, and states:

> ROSE: When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me. For my part in the matter. […] I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore. It was my choice. It was my life and I didn't have to live it like that. But that's what life offered me in the way of being a woman and I took it (Fences 98).

Rose made herself invisible for the sake of her husband and family; she realizes by the end of the play that this was a mistake.

Rose's rage, which was triggered after Troy revealed his affair and Raynell's conception, resulted in the death of her marriage, but more importantly led to the birth of Rose Maxson, her own woman. When Troy kills his marriage, which was a reason for Rose's existence, this action and her ensuing rage propels Rose to a place where she is able to stand without a man. Rose leaving her marriage is the manifestation of her rage, and indicates her power. Wilson demonstrates Rose's strength by having her do two things toward the end of the play: dissolve her marriage and accept Troy's illegitimate child. Taking in Raynell is not a weak action, but rather a generous one, because Rose recognizes Raynell is not at fault for Troy and Alberta's affair. Raynell also allows Rose the opportunity to continue to be a nurturer—but this time Rose is nurturing on her own terms. Just before Troy's funeral, Rose tells Cory:

> ROSE: By the time Raynell came into the house, me and your daddy had done lost touch with one another. I didn't want to make my blessing off of nobody's misfortune…but I took on to Raynell like she was all them babies I had wanted and never had. […] Like I'd been blessed to relive a part of my life [as a mother/nurturer]. And if the Lord see fit to keep up my strength…I'm gonna do her just like your daddy did you…I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me (Fences 98).

When Rose talks about losing touch with Troy, what she is saying is they could no longer be unified because she was becoming a different person, a different woman. Rose was no longer nurturing Troy; the space was open for Raynell to fill.

Rose directed her pain to its appropriate target (Troy) and was able to move to a positive space because of this. Rose decides she is going to do the best she can for Raynell. As Rose does, women in the Civil Rights Movement also expressed their desire for freedom quietly, in the shadows of men. Rose is not a revolutionary like civil rights activists Ella Baker or Jo Ann Robinson; however, Rose's placement mirrors the placement of African-American women in the Civil Rights Movement. Although the prominent African-American women in the Movement were invaluable, they were not presented to the public as leaders or in control. One could argue that the Civil Rights Movement was not their story, just as Fences is not Rose's story. In spite of this, Rose is the backbone of the Maxson family. American society in the 1950s dictated that Rose's path in life was to nurture her family, not critique it. Rose's placement parallels confrontations and gender hierarchy within the Civil Rights Movement.

Unfortunately, it was not only housewives like Rose who had to stand behind their men. Female movers and shakers in the Civil Rights Movement found themselves in the same position, being treated as second class citizens. Women leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were not allowed to express their rage to its fullest potential, which would lead to empowerment, as was seen with Malcolm X. Instead, African-American women had to repress their emotions, in favor of deferring to men; this passion for civil rights was eventually re-directed to other projects. Like the women in the Civil Rights Movement, Rose's function in Fences is not as obvious

as Troy and Cory's; after her confrontation with Troy, Rose re-directed herself away from Troy to Raynell, the church, and her own self-discovery, Wilson's acknowledgement of the Women's Rights Movement.

While African Americans were demanding their rights during the Civil Rights Movement from 1945 to 1974, women began to demand their rights during the Women's Rights Movement, which spanned the 1960s and 1970s. The same ideological rage that inspired African Americans to take action during the Civil Rights Movement roused women to demand equality. Between the formation of the Commission on the Status of Women (1961), which documented women's second class status in America, and the founding of National Organization for Women (1966), which was more radical about demanding women's rights, Rose evaluated her failed marriage, as well as what she could have done differently. Much like the women who left the state commissions to help form the National Organization for Women, Rose left Troy. Eventually, Rose realized that instead of standing behind Troy, she should have been standing at his side. I suggest that Rose continues to grow into her independence once the play ends. This will be most clearly realized with the Raynell character, as she will have freedoms not available to Rose.

The Link Among Rage, Integration, and Retrospective Structure

The relationship among Troy's father, Troy, and Cory illustrates the most obvious representation of a familial black rage succession in the play. In addition to roaring at Cory over integration issues, Troy is also howling at his deceased father, who was heavily burdened by his sharecropper status; this oppression shaped Troy's father's antagonistic relationship with his son (Fences 50-52). What these social realities illustrate is that history can affect a family and how close they are to each

other. The oppression of generations of African-American families has produced Troy (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 116). While Troy does resist social injustices in American society, he saves his most potent raging for his family, just as *his* father did (DeVries 23). When comparing fathers and sons, retrospective structure, using the past to impact the present, is necessary.

Retrospective structure, a deliberate attempt to use the past to highlight something in the present, is used most effectively through the two father/son conflicts in the play and the "Old Blue" song. Although I argue that the connections between fathers and sons impact character actions, a connection between two events does not mean one event automatically causes the other. However, Troy's father's inability to express human emotion, because he was too busy trying to survive as an African-American man in an oppressive society, impelled Troy to do the same thing. Troy's relationship with his father influenced almost every aspect of his life. Troy tells Lyons and Bono about his father:

> TROY: Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids. […] All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. […] The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin [the plantation owner]. […] he [Troy's father] was just as evil as he could be. My mama couldn't stand him. Couldn't stand that evilness. […] All his women run off and left him (Fences 50-51).

While Troy is responsible for his adult life, his past experiences with his father shape Troy's present existence with his son and wife. Troy does not know how to be in a loving marital relationship, partly because he never witnessed his father experiencing one (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 133). Troy's recollection shows how rage can negatively impact a man's relationship with his father.

Troy's father showed him that being an African-American man in White America invariably meant living a hard life. The catalyst for this lesson was a girl Troy was interested in; it turned out his father was also interested in this girl, and was going to use his power over Troy to get what he wanted. The battle between Troy and his father occurred in 1918, when, at the age of fourteen, Troy took his first glimpse of what racism and oppression could do to an African-American man, causing him to rage against his own family. Troy knew his father was mean and unfeeling, but he did not give much thought as to *why* his father was this way until Troy and his father literally fought over a girl. When Troy fought his father, Troy released his frustrated rage (Elkins 105). Troy's frustration arose because he had been under his father's oppressive thumb for fourteen years. When Troy looked into his father's face, just before his father beat him unconscious, he realized how hard his father's life had been, and how American society whipped his father into submission—to the point where he would abuse his own son. This was Troy's first indirect glance at American racism, and the destruction it can foster; Troy would not be directly confronted by racism until he tried to cross the color line at least twenty years later. At the age of fourteen, when Troy looked in his father's face, he described it as seeing the devil; what Troy really saw was a man weighed down by oppression (Fences 52). After this encounter, Troy knew his relationship with his father had changed forever. Troy's expositional battles with his father provide insight into his present relationship with Cory. Troy's abuse towards Cory is rooted in the fact that the trajectory of Troy's life has made a mockery of the supposed glories of integration ("The Chitlin Circuit" 47).

Just as Troy's father did not prepare Troy to deal with segregation, Troy is incapable of preparing Cory for the integrated world that waits before him. Luckily for Cory, he does not need Troy to help him recognize the progress that has been made. Cory can see a hope for the future, which is in direct opposition to Troy, who does not see an optimistic future for himself, his sons, or any African American, and is dead to the idea. Unfortunately, this numbing thought process is embraced by Troy because of his rejection by the Major Leagues (one of the disappointments in his life) and his not fully understanding integration as a social movement.

Integration is a complex issue for African Americans because integration leads to choices. This situation is exhibited as Troy and Rose argue over where to shop. Troy would rather shop at the African-American-owned Bella's, because she treats him like a human being, while Rose would rather shop at the white-owned A & P, because their prices are lower (Fences 7). The A & P's prices are lower because it could afford to do this; this is not possible with small African-American businesses. In spite of whose decision is "right," one thing is clear—before integration, the Maxsons would have had no option but to shop at Bella's.

Although integration provided more opportunities for African-Americans, these positive gains also had negative repercussions. On the one hand, integration unlocked doors for African Americans. On the other hand, most if not all of the African-American-owned and African-American-run businesses that were thriving in African-American communities before integration were killed, including the Negro Leagues. As Jackie Robinson rode the wave of integration into professional baseball, he had no way of knowing that his victories would hammer the final nail into the Negro Leagues' coffin (Rogosin 20). Robinson, like Troy, began his baseball career

in the Negro Leagues (beginning spring training in Houston in 1945) after being a well-known UCLA football player (30). By 1951 all of the best African-American baseball players were in the white leagues, a.k.a. the Major Leagues. Although the Negro American League was alive until circa 1960, the League spent its last years dying from lack of support and prestige (5). When African Americans were able to enter White America, they oftentimes left behind their community. Just as integration opened up Rose and Troy's shopping options and Jackie Robinson's baseball opportunities, integration also shook up the American workplace and educational landscape.

Integration is visible at the workplace, but it is also profoundly tied to education and progress; it is under the umbrella of education and progress that the Maxson family becomes further understood. Neither Troy's father nor Troy had an education; this lack of education and the resultant low social position led to both Troy and his father's respective actions. It was their own society that placed both men in their boxes—sharecropper and Negro League ballplayer, respectively. Even when Troy was able to benefit from integration on his job, his worldview had been set, and his treatment of Cory was in full swing. When Troy crushed Cory's educational aspirations, Cory exploded at the appropriate target—his father. Cory's rage, which stays with him over the next seven or eight years, propels him out of Troy's house and into another bastion of integration for Cory's generation—the military.

The impetus for Cory and Troy's battles is not a girl, but rather the reality of integration. Troy's first "expositional" mention of Cory, which comes early in the play and jump-starts the next generation of father-son combat, also shows where Troy

stands on integration. Troy does not understand or accept that integration is changing his society. Referring to Cory, Troy tells Rose and Bono:

> TROY: I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football.
>
> ROSE: He [Cory] ain't talking about making no living playing football. […] It's a honor to be recruited.
>
> TROY: It ain't gonna get him nowhere. Bono'll tell you that.
>
> BONO: If he be like you in the sports…he's gonna be alright. Ain't but two men ever play baseball as good as you.
>
> TROY: What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.
>
> ROSE: Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. […] Times have changed a lot since then.
>
> TROY: How in hell they done changed?
>
> ROSE: They got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.
>
> BONO: You right about that, Rose. Times have changed, Troy. You just come along too early.
>
> TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early! (Fences 8-9).

Troy is still scarred by previous integration rebuffs; this wounding provides me with some insight into Troy's relationship with Cory. Although Troy resists believing that integration will improve Cory's life, he accepts that integration is seemingly improving his life on the job.

At age fifty-three, Troy is representative of the older African-American man who has seen life, is just tired now, and has no interest in making any major ideological changes—just as his father was set in his ways. While society was changing around Troy, he represents the African-American person who has given up

hope of ever reaching the mountaintop. Even though it may appear that Troy is not a content person, in light of his battles on his job, being a garbage truck driver does not represent the mountaintop for Troy; playing baseball in the Major Leagues does, and Troy *subconsciously* recognizes that that dream is long gone.

Because Troy could not fulfill his sports dream, he does not want Cory to realize one of his dreams either. Critic Edwin Wilson argues that when Troy destroys Cory's chance of obtaining a college football scholarship, Troy does this out of jealousy ("Wilson's 'Fences' on Broadway..." 317). In Marilyn Elkins's August Wilson: A Casebook, Pamela Jean Monaco argues that Troy sabotages Cory because:

> His [Troy's] primary relationships were truncated, Troy has never learned to receive and give true love. [...] He does not have the stability of self to look at Cory's aspirations and possibilities as belonging to Cory, separate from him. Troy cannot let Cory find his own song because Troy is still trying to authenticate himself (97).

If Troy accepted the fact that Cory could do something that was denied to him, he would have to acknowledge *consciously* the possibility that his time had passed; and he never received the tools (from his father) that would allow him to make this distinction (97).

Both Troy and Cory's respective solutions for dealing with their fathers is to run away. When Troy and his father fought, Troy literally had to escape his father's domain. The same thing happened between Troy and Cory approximately forty years later, starting the pattern anew. Since Troy was driven from his father's house because of his father's eruption, this facilitates my understanding of how and why Troy allows the same emotions to drive Cory from his house. According to Gunilla Theander Kester, in Marilyn Elkins's August Wilson: A Casebook:

> As a father, Troy very much repeats his father's behavior, especially toward Cory. Troy seems determined to give his son the same sense of loss of–and desire for–a home. When Troy and Cory fight, however, the focus remains on Troy's inability to get beyond that moment by the creek when he saw the devil [his enraged father]. Looking at his son some thirty years later, he repeats himself when he tells his son "You got the devil in you" [...] The [...] memory in *Fences* illustrates the strong influence of a past which remains a vital or even controlling part of the present. [...This...] memory functions in the same way to erase the passing of time in Cory's feelings about his father. [...] He fears [...] the presence of his father... [taking over his life] (Elkins 113).

Kester suggests that just as the past impinges upon Troy's present, Cory's memory of his father will allow him to accept his father in the future. By returning to and accepting his father with the help of a song, Cory is able to take this solution of running away into a positive direction. The "Old Blue" song helps Cory to accept his father for who he is. Once this acceptance has occurred, Cory does not need to fear Troy taking over his life, because Troy has become *an acceptable part* of Cory's life.

Cory, the latest entry in the male Maxson generation, is able to move beyond his father and grandfather by releasing the bitterness he felt toward Troy. I suggest that if Cory had followed in Troy's footsteps, the Maxson family's episodes would have continued with a new cast—Cory's family. Fortunately, this was not the case, since Cory realized he could erase the negative image of his father only by accepting Troy's history. By embracing his roots, Cory sheds the limitations imposed by his father's narrow view of the world and achieves self-definition (Elkins 90). Once Cory accepts his father's song, he also finds his own song. Music releases Cory's rage and stop him from running from his father.

When Cory and Raynell sing "Old Blue," the song acts as a mediator between Cory and the dead Troy. Besides crossing generations, the "Old Blue" song almost serves as a conduit, allowing acceptance to flow from Cory to Troy. Fences, as with

most Wilson works, feature characters breaking into song—five of the seven characters sing at some point in the play, with three of the seven characters singing some variation of "Old Blue."

"Old Blue" serves as a thread to the past, present and future; the voices of the past help influence the actions of those in the present. Pamela Jean Monaco argues that when Raynell and Cory sing "Old Blue":

> Wilson alludes to the African concept of Mantu, which is a belief that the spirits of the dead influence the living [...] This African philosophy postulates that through "this interchange of life force, by which the departed give advice to and empower the living," the living shall in return bring honor to the ancestors (Elkins 95).

The singing of Troy's song empowers Cory; Cory recognizes Troy's presence in the song and is able to accept Troy (98), thus honoring his memory. The climactic perception shift occurs after Cory and Raynell sing "Old Blue," when Cory decides to attend Troy's funeral (Fences 96, 99-100), allowing Cory's long-held rage to dissipate. The Maxson family pattern is broken because Cory accepts Troy, including his crookeds and his straights.

Kim Pereira connects music to generational and familial progressions:

> That Cory can accept his father's spirit in him–something Troy could not do–is as much a testament to the times in which he [Cory] lives as it is to his character. He is not contained by the same circumstances that beset his father and grandfather, for he lives in the sixties, a decade of some hope for blacks. His career in the marines is not an echo of the variations of slavery endured by his father and grandfather. Once he welcomes his father's spirit, he is free to sing his father's song. Troy's daughter, Raynell, joins him, and *as they sing we can almost hear Troy's voice singing with them*, for this is the song he used to sing, the song made up by his father. In the final scene of the play, three generations of Maxsons are reconciled; in this old song are harmonized the voices and spirits of two fathers and two sons–and the sins of the father are truly forgiven (45; emphasis added).

Although Troy had always heard the "Old Blue" song and recognized that he received it from his father, Troy never *found* his song. In 1965, however, Cory and Raynell know their song and where it comes from, and they can use this knowledge to propel them to greater heights—mountaintops Troy would have never thought possible.

Men's Choices: Crime or the Military?

Just as Raynell and Cory make decisions based on the culture they live in, society also influenced the life paths of the other male Maxson characters. These choices further split the males in the family. Of the four Maxson men, two choose crime and wind up in jail (Troy and Lyons), while the other two wind up in the integrated military (Gabriel and Cory) (Katz 420-421).

The paths that the Maxson men take are rooted in both American social structure and the Maxson family structure. America is failing its African-American men in the 21st Century, as it has since America's inception; as African-American men try to enter the social and economic mainstream, they are often rebuffed. In his book, Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites, Paul L. Wachtel advocates that:

> fact that such a huge number of black men are in jail or otherwise entangled in the criminal justice system—a recent study in Baltimore, for example, reported that on any given day more than fifty percent of black males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were in prison or under criminal justice supervision—is a symptom of a serious failure to address the obstacles that keep African Americans from entering the social and economic mainstream (200).

While these men do not *have to* turn to a life of crime, many young African-American men believe that they do not have other options, just as Troy believed before he went to jail.

When Troy left his father's house, Troy thought the world laid before him. As Troy tells Lyons, Rose and Bono about the transition from leaving his father's house to jail, he relates:

> Colored folks living down there [in Mobile, Alabama] on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. […] Messed around there and went from bad to worse. Started stealing. First it was food. Then I figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too! One thing led to another. Met your [Lyons's] mama. I was young and anxious to be a man. Met your mama and had you. What I do that for? Now I got to worry about feeding you and her. Got to steal three times as much (Fences 54).

This passage highlights three things: Troy's view of his responsibility, his options, and his relationship with Lyons. In telling this story, which reveals the history of Troy's first marriage, Troy basically tells Lyons that he wished he was not born ("What I do that for?"). This insensitivity has impacted and will continue to affect the kind of man Lyons becomes. The overwhelming responsibility Troy has placed on himself, which impressed upon his choices. Without options (like education or the military), a life of crime is a choice that looms over Troy and his brethren. Troy made the choice to steal, but I cannot lose sight of the fact that societal pressures, racism, and his inability to transcend his past influenced Troy's lack of choices.

This social problem (a lack of choices) is still relevant and prevalent in contemporary America. Wachtel argues that there "is no isolated 'crime problem' that can be solved by criminal justice measures alone, leaving for other efforts the solution to housing segregation, poorly functioning schools, joblessness, or the cultural values and adaptations that derive from all of these" (193). What Wachtel is saying is that crime does not occur in a vacuum; societal occurrences, like joblessness, can continue to reduce the opportunities available to someone like Troy.

In Troy's case, his incarceration deprived Lyons of his father, almost guaranteeing Lyons a life with little or no discipline, creating another set of social problems that will perpetuate the choice of crime that has robbed the Maxson men of many years.

Both Troy and Lyons had absentee fathers. Since Troy was physically unavailable, as opposed to his father being emotionally occupied, Troy had more contact with his father than Lyons. Troy left his father's house at fourteen, an age when he should have been *learning about* manhood, not *living* as a man. While America failed both Troy and Lyons, their respective fathers failed them more. I suggest that both Troy and Lyons wound up in jail partially because their fathers were not present (figuratively and/or literally) to guide them. Both Troy and his father were not present in their respective sons' lives. Troy's father was not emotionally there for him because his oppressive sharecropper status exacerbated his anger. Troy was not physically available to Lyons because Troy was in jail for killing a man whom he had tried to rob; both criminal activities (the robbery and the murder) were motivated by Troy's desperation. Thus, black rage directly and indirectly lead both Troy and Lyons on the path to jail.

Unlike Troy and Lyons, Cory and Gabriel do not wind up in jail, but rather in the military; integration and the Maxson family structure partially impact this choice. While I know that Cory grew up with Troy, Wilson does not provide me with information on Gabriel's upbringing, so I am not sure if Gabriel left his father's house at an early age, or stayed until he was a man. Gabriel's information is not crucial to understand the difference between him and Cory, and Troy and Lyons, as the main reason why Cory and Gabriel chose the military over a life of crime is that they both had their older brothers' example of what *not* to follow. In his cycle plays, Wilson

always uses the past to help people/characters make choices about their future. This choice that Gabriel and Cory made highlights the differences between them and their brothers and the opportunities available to the younger two. So, instead of choosing the criminal route, which Troy and Lyons do, Gabriel and Cory chose one of the other options open to them as African-American men—the integrated military. Therefore, black rage directly and indirectly led to relocation (to jail for Troy, or the military for Gabriel), which then led to the creation of a model for the next generation (Lyons and Cory, respectively). Fences ends with the men fractured until they are all able to come together (including Troy) for Troy's funeral, where the family is able to heal old wounds.

Conclusion

Through Troy and his father, I see how American society can oppress an African-American man to the point where he would turn on his own family, causing his family to splinter. Before the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, American society defined Troy's father as a sharecropper; Troy's father felt trapped and knew he could not express his feelings towards white society, so he saved it for his family. By ignoring the changing society around him, Troy follows in his father's footsteps when he allows his rejection by the Major Leagues, because of his racial ideology, to impact his perception of Cory's placement and potential achievements within collegiate athletics; these opportunities were afforded to Cory because of integration and the Civil Rights Movement. Troy not being able to recognize that American society was changing leads to battles with his son. These confrontations drive Cory to leave his father's house, just as Troy had to leave his father's house forty years earlier. Through my analysis, I see how this negative behavior can be passed down

from generation to generation. Troy treats Cory the way he does because this is basically the way his father treated him. Just as the past negatively impacted the present and the future, Cory is able to use this same past, represented through "Old Blue," to afford himself a more positive future. Cory does this by accepting his father and pressing forward with his life, knowing that being Troy Maxson's son is only *a part of* who Cory Maxson is. Because of racial progress, Cory can acknowledge the past and recognize that he does not have to carry the negative manifestations of black rage that has been weighing down Maxson men for generations. This is Wilson's point—I should embrace my past, the good, the bad, and everything in between, and allow this powerful history to propel me forward, reaching for heights that were out of reach for the generation before me.

Chapter 6: *Two Trains Running (1969)*

Introduction

This play is about change—a changing America and the developing perception of what it means to be African American as realized through three men (Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling) coming into their own in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1969. The demonstration of black rage by two of these characters (Hambone and Sterling) shows the different ways African-American men in the 1960s fought racial injustice. Sterling and Hambone are different characters from distinct eras that produce opposite results from their exhibition of black rage. Hambone's manifestation of rage led to a demand for justice, while Sterling's presentation of rage motivated him to *take* what was due. These two tracks parallel the shift from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement in the 1960s. In Two Trains Running, the tension between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power is "the play's primary historical theme" (Nadel 117). This decade's double focus—the title refers to life and death and other dualistic choices—makes the black rage in this play distinctive from the others in the cycle.

How Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling express (or do not express) rage is intricately tied to which racial identity and era they belong—the pre-Civil Rights era, the Civil Rights age, or the era of Black Power. Memphis is initially a representation of the pre-Civil Rights era, which explains why Wilson does not allow Memphis to express his rage. In his text, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare (1991), James H. Cone describes the transition from pre-Civil rights to Civil rights: "For many years […] the masses of Negroes acquiesced in their situation of

oppression because they did not feel that they could do anything about it, […but soon…] the masses of Negroes discovered that they could do a great deal for the cause of freedom" (70). Once Memphis moves towards Civil Rights and Black Power, Wilson implies that Memphis's black rage will be activated. Wilson mostly uses Memphis as a transitional character, to highlight the more obvious differences and connections between the Black Power-influenced Sterling and Hambone. Wilson is very critical of Hambone's Civil Rights-inspired rage, mostly using Hambone to contrast and trumpet Sterling's Black Power ideology. In his speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson declares: "The Black Power movement of the '60s was a reality; it was the kiln in which I was fired, and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness" (14-15). I suggest that Wilson is calling for his African-American audience to emulate Sterling's Black Power-tinged rage, and take what is due them in contemporary America, just as Sterling did in 1969. The year 1969 represented a new age—it was no longer time to ask, it was time to take. During this year, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. urged African Americans to join "the black revolution" because "nonviolence is no longer the most effective civil rights strategy" (Cowan and Maguire 257). By "black revolution," Powell was referring to Black Power.

By 1969, the Black Power Movement called for a direct and forceful response to racial oppression. Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) coined the phrase "Black Power" in 1967 (Hayes 294). In his text, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation (1967), co-written with Charles V. Hamilton, Ture defines Black Power as:

> a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define

> their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this [American] society. […] group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society (44).

Black Power is an ideology, an idea; ideas are useless unless they activate action. This is how black rage co-exists with Black Power ideology; the rage either spurs action, or is a result of this ideology. This raging response is represented in Two Trains Running in the character of Sterling, who exhibits what Wilson calls "warrior spirit." In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson defined warrior spirit as:

> The people who look around to see what the society has cut out for them, who see the limits of their participation, and are willing to say, "No, I refuse to accept this limitation that you're imposing on me"—that's the warrior spirit. These are the same people who end up in the penitentiary, [a person who possesses the warrior spirit has a] willingness to battle, even to death (179).

What Wilson calls "warrior spirit" is another name for black rage. Using warrior spirit and three very different characters, Wilson shows how black rage is delineated in the progression from Civil Rights to Black Power in the 1960s.

Synopsis

Two Trains Running begins in May 1969 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The action of the play takes place in Memphis Lee's restaurant, which is across the street from West's Funeral Home and Lutz's Meat Market. Currently, West's Funeral Home is housing the wake of Prophet Samuel, a neighborhood seer or shyster, depending on your point of view. Wolf, a usual customer in Memphis's restaurant and the neighborhood's numbers runner, and Risa (actually Clarissa Thomas), a waitress at Memphis's restaurant, engage in conversation. Another regular customer, sixty-five-year-old Holloway, enters. Holloway, Memphis, Wolf, and Risa talk about money—who has it, and how did they get it. The city wants to buy Memphis's

property; Memphis is willing to sell it to them, but he will not take less than $25,000. As the characters discuss death and West's job, Hambone, a man in his late forties, described as having a "mental condition" in the stage directions, enters (Two Trains Running 14). Throughout the play, there is debate as to whether Hambone is truly crazy.

Hambone idiotically and consistently murmurs two phrases—"I want my ham." and "He gonna give me my ham." The "he" in question is Lutz, who owns the meat market. Nine to ten years ago, Lutz hired Hambone to paint the fence in back of his store. Lutz told Hambone he would pay him with a ham. After Hambone finished the job, Lutz offered him a chicken instead of the promised ham. Hambone refused this inferior payment, and his black rage was triggered. The physical expression of Hambone's rage has been to stand outside Lutz's store every day, grumbling about his ham.

While Risa gives Hambone something to eat, Wolf hands her two quarters to put in the jukebox, which has been broken for more than a year. After Risa exits to the back, Sterling Johnson enters. Sterling is adopted, thirty years old, and has been out of the penitentiary (for robbing a bank) for one week. Sterling gets reacquainted with Risa, whom he is clearly interested in, and meets the other customers in the restaurant. Sterling is looking for a job, and points out how difficult it is for an African-American man to get into the working system. Sterling mentions going over to Prophet Samuel's wake, to rub his head, and hopefully come into some money. Holloway tells Sterling that the person to visit is Aunt Ester, a three hundred and twenty-two-year-old representation of Africa. Hambone blurts out his mantra, and Sterling takes an interest in Hambone that will continue until the end of the play.

It is a new day—Monday—when West, a man in his early sixties, enters. West is always dressed all in black (including gloves), except for his white shirt. Sterling enters and passes out flyers for a rally celebrating the slain Malcolm X's birthday, explaining that the rally is about Black Power. When Hambone starts up about his ham, Memphis tells him (in front of Sterling) to go get his ham.

The next day—Tuesday—Sterling tells Risa he and Hambone have a connection. When Holloway enters, he and Sterling talk about the fence Hambone painted. Sterling believes that Hambone deserved more than one ham, much less just one chicken, for a job that size, as well as for the quality of Hambone's work. Sterling announces that he almost went to Lutz to get Hambone's ham, but then Hambone would not have anything to do, so Sterling decided against this. Hambone enters, and Sterling gets him to say something other than his usual phrases for the first time in almost ten years. After this momentous occasion, Memphis enters and is angry because the city only offered him $15,000 for his building. Memphis vows that the city is going to pay his price.

The following week, Sterling tries to get Hambone to say "Black is Beautiful." Hambone looks confused, and says the ever present "I want my ham." Sterling then tells Hambone to stick with him, and they will get his ham. Sterling successfully teaches Hambone to say "United we stand…Divided we fall."

The next day, Holloway asks about Hambone, whom no one has seen, including Lutz. Memphis finally goes to visit Aunt Ester before he goes to court about his property. Hambone dies peacefully in his sleep. As he was inspecting the body, West discovered that Hambone's body was covered with scars. When Sterling is told Hambone died, he is thrown. After this, Sterling is finally able to visit Aunt

Ester, who tells Sterling she is three hundred and forty-nine years old, which would place her birth date around 1620.

On Saturday—the day of Hambone's funeral—Memphis enters singing—he has also been drinking. Memphis throws twenty dollars in the river, as Aunt Ester instructed him to, and he got $35,000 for his property. Memphis visits Aunt Ester, and he realizes what he had to do with his life. He announces that he is going back to Jackson, Mississippi, to deal with Stovall, the man who ran him off his land in 1931. When Memphis realizes that Hambone is dead, he mimics Hambone, registering the pain in Hambone's life, as well as his own. Suddenly, breaking glass is heard, and a burglar alarm wails. Sterling, grinning, and bleeding from his face and hands, enters the restaurant, carrying a big ham. Sterling tells West to put the ham in Hambone's casket.

Black Power versus the Civil Rights Movement

In the chapter on Fences, I broke down the Civil Rights Movement into five phases; the last period, beginning in 1969, was "fragmental" because the movement had splintered into various movements after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death in 1968. In addition, during Two Trains Running's time frame, various conditions, including violence against nonviolent advocators, worsening ghettos, and European Americans' attempts to dominate African-American organizations all led to a resurgence of Black Nationalism in the 1960s, which fueled the Black Power Movement and the shift from Civil Rights (Hayes 274). In Two Trains Running, Wilson chronicles and trumpets the post-Civil Rights era, especially one of the movements that came out of it—Black Power, a movement which was offered as an alternative to old Civil Rights ideology (Understanding August Wilson 113).

Wilson scholar Mary L. Bogumil suggests that "Hambone's verbal accusations [are] meant specifically to shame Lutz but generally to decry white injustice" to/for the audience (Understanding August Wilson 116). Bogumil implies that Hambone's mantra is representative of Civil Rights ideology. If I replace "ham" with the following words: "freedom," "power," "money," or "autonomy"—this is further proof that Hambone represents the Civil Rights Movement because he is saying "I want my _____." "*He* (the European-American man) gonna *give* me my _____." Although there is a certain demanding quality to the first sentence, it is undercut by the second. Lutz, the specific European-American man in Hambone's demand, typifies a significant role in the play's message, which is "You will never get what you are due by asking your oppressor for it." Hambone, by doing this, believes he can work within the system. In her dissertation, "A Critical and Historical Analysis of Five Major Plays by August Wilson," Corlis Angela Hayes explains Hambone's position by analyzing civil rights ideology:

> "In essence, the Civil Rights Movement views the U.S. government as positive. […] Thus, the Civil Rights Movement rules out the need for *revolutionary change*, a complete and total restructuring of the society which would end the dominant role played by the rich in the economy and government. This revolutionary change is not necessary to solve the problems faced by Black people [civil rights followers] argue" (285; emphasis added).

Civil rights activists believed that change could occur with the help of the government, unlike what bell hooks is calling for—revolutionary change, which is oftentimes neither easy nor friendly. The European-American man is not going to give the African-American man anything, Wilson is suggesting with Hambone.

Although Hambone does not get what he wants with his non-violent raging, this does not diminish his significance to the play. Although Sterling is the

protagonist, expressions of Hambone's black rage are most consistently present in the play, via his mutterings. While he is able to challenge his persecution, unfortunately, his confrontations, which are his expressions of black rage, are ineffective, partially because he is still doing things the old way—agitating and asking. Bogumil suggests that Hambone provides "a pathetic, cryptic lamentation of *black rage* against white injustice" (Understanding August Wilson 98; emphasis added). His "lamentation of black rage" is pathetic and ineffective because his actions are outdated and do not procure justice for him. He is representative of the ineffectiveness of asking for one's civil rights. In effect, Hambone does not get what is due him while he is alive. Nevertheless, he does impact members of the African-American community in a major way. In his essay, "Black Madness in August Wilson's 'Down the Line Cycle'," Mark W. Rocha explains Hambone's importance to the African-American community:

> While much of the action of this play concerns the struggle of the black proprietor of the diner against the city that wants to buy his property cheaply for the sake of "urban renewal", the *heart and soul* of this play is a retarded character named Hambone and his tragic quest to get his due. […] Hambone comes into the diner each day with but one thing to say, [his mantra which] occasions a running conflict between those who want Hambone to take his chicken and shut up, and those who support Hambone [Risa, Holloway, Sterling]. […] Hambone has been described throughout the play as an "idiot", when of course the value of this madman to his community is beyond measure (199-200; emphasis added).

This conflict is between African Americans who will take what they are given and African Americans who will not. Bogumil supports the notion that Hambone affected many characters: "Although Hambone's body surrenders, tires from Lutz's injustice, his spirit survives. Hambone's death effects an essential change in the characters of Sterling, Risa, and Memphis" (Understanding August Wilson 117). For example,

Hambone will inspire Memphis to move toward the Black Power Movement. Hambone is very effective in motivating other characters to realize traits about themselves; however, one area where Hambone is deficient is telling his own history.

Though Hambone influences the other characters, they know very little about him. By the end of the play, Wilson reveals that Hambone's body was covered in scars, and no one knows how Hambone received them. These scars tell us that Hambone has had to endure a lot more than not getting his ham; Hambone has been wounded, just as the Civil Rights Movement is battered and injured by 1969. This damaged movement made way for the next generation.

The Black Power Movement thrived during the 1960s, as Wilson was entering adulthood. Wilson cites Amiri Baraka as one of his influences because of the nationalist ideologies he trumpeted in the 1960s. Wilson calls himself a Black Nationalist and cultural nationalist, so he has a special kinship to Sterling (Moyers 175). In some ways, Wilson was Sterling when he was in his 20s. Black Power calls for African Americans to unite, recognize their heritage, build a sense of community, engage in self-determination, be autonomous, reject racism, and operate from a position of strength. Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon explains Wilson's position on Black Power, and what he advocates with this play:

> Wilson's no doubt controversial sanction of crime and violence as a means of equalizing justice in America for blacks echoes the similarly controversial ideology he shared with fellow revolutionary activists of the turbulent '60s. Thus, the way he sees it, one's willingness to go back to pick up the ball overshadows whatever else is done or said in the process; *actions*, not words, are of paramount importance (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 182).

The willingness to take action is a necessary requirement of both the Black Nationalist and Black Power Movements. Wilson would argue that although Sterling

commits a crime to come into his own, America has committed many, many racist offenses to become the superpower it is today. Wilson would ask, why are these infractions any more or less relevant than Sterling's, who is just trying to survive in a capitalist obstacle course? Sterling and Wilson are brothers in arms as both resist these race crimes, using Black Power, Black Nationalism, and black rage ideologies.

Sterling uses Black Nationalist tenets, and a warrior spirit to equalize justice in American society. One way of doing this is by improving his financial standing in the very capitalist American society. Like a lot of African Americans, Sterling plays the numbers (the lottery), hoping to hit it big and improve his status. As it turns out, Sterling's number came up, but the Alberts, the European-American family who ran the numbers game, tried to bilk Sterling out of half of his winnings. Because Sterling is a Black Nationalist and exhibits warrior spirit, he confronts the oppressive condition, and winds up being victorious. Though he does not get his full winnings, he is able to confront European-American oppression and walk away from the battle. While this is not a complete victory, it is significant (like Willie Boy's in The Piano Lesson). Because he is willing to fight, Sterling winds up with more than the other African Americans whose number was also picked and cut. While the dollar amount of the victory is not significant, the symbolic win is.

Wilson would consider Sterling's articulation of black rage and warrior spirit highly effective. It is Sterling's warrior spirit that leads him to rob a bank when he needed money to live, to steal gas and sell it to get some money, to confront the Alberts and receive a $2 victory, and to avenge the injustice enacted upon Hambone. According to Wilson scholar Joan Herrington, Two Trains Running "explores issues of economic and spiritual empowerment and the impact of collective action" (17).

Money is a significant issue as it is linked to both black rage and the past. For example, Wilson shows how Sterling's link to money triggers his black rage, which leads to a communal experience for members of the African-American community when he steals Hambone's ham. Sterling resists the economic control that European Americans have over African Americans. Bogumil explains how money operates in the play, and especially impacts Sterling's choices:

> *Two Trains Running* revolves around the theme of […] the connection between hard work, rightful compensation, […] and identity. Like many people living in poor economic conditions, failing to find legitimate means of support, […] Sterling pursue[s] illegal or suspicious means of income—outside the traditional bounds of accepted occupations (Understanding August Wilson 103-104).

I agree with Bogumil—Hambone's story is about being properly paid, while the progression between Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling speaks to the identity of the African-American man in the 1960s.

Historians Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame quote Malcolm X explaining the difference between a revolution and a movement, "'Revolution is never based on *begging* somebody for an integrated cup of coffee. Revolutions are never fought by turning the other cheek. […] And revolutions are never waged singing 'We Shall Overcome.' Revolutions are based upon *bloodshed*. […] Revolutions overturn systems'" (417; emphasis added). Like Malcolm X, Wilson advocates the use of black rage to take what one is due. Both X and Wilson insist that blood must be shed for systems to change. Shannon explains why it is necessary for Sterling to bleed at the end of the play: "as a thinly veiled disciple of Malcolm X, [Sterling represents] the black man's willingness to shed blood for their cause" (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 181).

Memphis, Hambone, Sterling

Wilson uses Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling as examples of racial development, with their individual ideologies overlapping and affecting each other's actions. They are allegories of the development of the African-American man, especially in his relationship with the European-American man: he has moved from being powerless under the European-American man's thumb, to being able to confront him, but still not receiving what he is due, to taking what he is owed. A pre-Civil Rights Memphis, who could not safely exhibit his rage, was not able to challenge the European-American man effectively. Memphis is a usual figure in Wilson's plays—an African-American man trying to be somebody in the face of American discrimination. In 1931, Memphis was basically run out of Jackson, Mississippi, yet another victim of racial oppression in American society. This Memphis, who could not use his rage to fight back, was representative of the pre-Civil Rights era. Although Memphis does not express black rage, his role emphasizes both Hambone and Sterling's expressions of rage, thus it is necessary to understand Memphis, in order to comprehend the characters that do rage. Memphis explains his pre-Civil Rights self to the other characters:

> I'm going back to Jackson [Mississippi] and get my land one of these days. I still got the deed. They [white men] ran me out of there but I'm going back. […] Jim Stovall, who I bought the land from, told me my deed say if I found any water the sale was null and void. […] he [Stovall] had a bunch of these fellows get together to pick on me. […] They took and cut my mule's belly out while it standing there. Just took a knife and sliced it open. I stood there and watched them. They was laughing about it. I look and see where they got me covered. […] *I didn't want to die.* […] I stood there and watched them cut his belly open. […] One of them reached down, grabbed hold of his dick, and cut that off. I stood there looking at them. I say, "Okay. I know the rules now. If you do that to something that ain't never done nothing to you … then I know what you would do to me. […] I was looking for them to try something. […] Got home and they had set fire to my crop. To get to my

> house I'd have to walk through fire. *I wasn't ready to do that* (Two Trains Running 72-73; emphasis added).

The pre-Civil Rights Memphis did not really have any effective legal recourse to deal with Stovall and his boys. Also, Memphis did not possess warrior spirit at this point; he was not willing to die for his cause. While this blues solo depicts an oppressive event in Memphis's life, it also gives me clues as to where his destiny will be—the south. Because of Civil Rights victories depicted, Wilson asks, will Memphis go back to his southern roots, and take back what was his? Before Memphis can reach his destiny, however, he needs to be loosened from his pre-Civil Rights shackles. This transformation will be facilitated through his encounters with Hambone, who represents Civil Rights.

Hambone began his fight with Lutz in 1960, he has been asking for his ham for nine years, so the decade began with an African-American man willing to get up in the European-American man's face, unlike what happened with Memphis. Wilson discusses Hambone in an interview with Mark William Rocha: "Hambone shows us that a new black man was created in the 1960's who would not accept a chicken" (Nadel 129). Lutz feels he can offer Hambone less than he is due because European Americans like him and Stovall have *economic control* over the Blacks in the play (Understanding August Wilson 94). Rocha elucidates: "The putative theme of *Two Trains Running* […] concerns the fundamental injustice of an American economic system in which the black man has never been paid a fair price for his contributions" (Nadel 127-128).

When Lutz reneged on their agreement, Hambone was full of rage as he asked for his rightful payment. When he was denied, his black rage motivated and fueled his battle with Lutz for more than nine years. Eventually, this rage crystallizes into

what could be perceived as madness. Memphis tells Risa, "That man [Hambone] crazy. He let Lutz drive him crazy" (Two Trains Running 44). Though Wilson does not suggest that black rage leads to insanity, I argue that an impotent use of rage that is not rooted in the power of the past can paralyze a person. Lutz set off Hambone's black rage, and it led to his "mental condition," which resulted in Hambone being a weak and ineffective African American. Hambone is representative of the Civil Rights-inspired African-American man, who is willing to express his rage within the confines of society, in a non-violent manner. While Hambone asking for his ham every day for almost ten years is a demonstration of rage, it is not the most effective way to get what he is due. Though his rage does not result in a positive conclusion that he can witness, Hambone's rage is crucial to the creation of Sterling.

Hambone's demonstration of rage is significant in that it motivates both the birth and rage of the new African-American man—Sterling. By this, I am referring to men who heed Black Power ideology, and recognize the power of the African past. By the end of the play, Sterling's rage is inspired, and he takes matters into his own hands to get Hambone his elusive ham. By the end of the decade, Sterling is definitely not going to accept less than he is due. Sterling introduces Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement into the play to help Hambone as Sterling is all about Black Power-driven action. Wilson told Shannon, "Sterling can resurrect and redeem Hambone […] This produces the man of action. Without Hambone, you don't have a Sterling" ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson" 552-553). This is why Hambone dies before the end of the play—to create the new black man—Sterling, a man who takes what he deserves.

Although Hambone inspires Sterling and Memphis to engage in Black Power-inspired activities, it is more important that the two men visit Aunt Ester. After his visit, Sterling is empowered and defends Hambone's memory. Memphis, intending to go back to south to claim his land, is strengthened as well by his visit to Aunt Ester. In his willingness to fight the city and the south, Memphis also connotes Malcolm X by the end of the play, moving from a Civil Rights position to a Black Power stance. Aunt Ester is a conjure woman who stands in for the past. She goes all the way back to Africa and uses the strength of this connection. If Aunt Ester is 349 years old, as she tells Sterling, she would have been born in 1620, one year after the first slaves were brought to America. Rocha calls Aunt Ester the original African American, as old as the black experience; she is the past (Nadel 128). In an interview with Richard Pettengill, Wilson said Aunt Ester "represents the entire 349 years that blacks have been in America. […] All of that is alive, and you can tap into it if you know where to go, what to say" (Elkins 212-213). Memphis and Sterling are characters that eventually tap into this wealth of information. Holloway explains her power: "Aunt Ester […] make you right with yourself. […] Aunt Ester got a power cause she got an understanding. Anybody live as long as she has is bound to have an understanding" (Two Trains Running 22). Aunt Ester is the past, and her authority allows characters to recognize their own strength. Wilson explains what Aunt Ester means to some members of the African-American community, "you have that which doesn't die—the character of Aunt Ester, which is the tradition" ("How to Write A Play Like August Wilson" H5). After visiting Aunt Ester, Memphis and Sterling, represent the new black men, are "the next generation," the "new life," the transformed "black people" (Nadel 130).

Wilson uses Memphis to elucidate the power of storytelling and how black rage can be inspired. In an interview with Rocha, Wilson discussed the Memphis character:

> And there's a transformation in Memphis. His story is that he's been run out of Jackson [Mississippi] and of course that's not something you'd want to reveal to others. But eventually he does tell his story. That's a big change in this man and it leads him back to Jackson. Memphis learns that lost territory can be regained (Nadel 130).

Harkening back to Levee in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Memphis has a blues solo that not only shows the oppression in his life, but how this persecution shaped his pre- and post-Civil Rights self. Memphis's blues solo attests to Wilson's belief that there is strength in tales, as his yarn does two things: one, it tells me where Memphis came from—the pre-Civil Rights world; two, it sets me up for his eventual Black Power transformation. Because storytelling is so important to Wilson, it should not be surprising that Aunt Ester spiritually heals by getting her visitors to tell their life stories (Nadel 131; Nobles 135).

Once Memphis visits Aunt Ester, once he is ready to walk through fire, then he will be ready to return to fight former battles. After Memphis sees Aunt Ester, she inspires in him hints of Black Power ideology that will fuel his journey back down south, to get what is due him. Although Memphis embraces Civil Rights ideology (e.g., his court battle) throughout most of the play, once he obtains some healthy advice from Mother Africa, he adopts tenets of Black Power ideology, which calls for its followers to take what is due them. In Memphis's case, he intends to take back his land. Rocha, in his essay, "American History as 'Loud Talking' in *Two Trains Running*," explains the significance of his visit: "Memphis's announcement of the payout [for his restaurant] at the end of the play is far less important than his

announcement that he has visited Aunt Ester, who has given him the resolve to return to Jackson [Mississippi] to confront Stovall, the first white man to cheat him" (Nadel 129). Memphis, like Sterling, is now willing to engage in action to get what he wants. Memphis becomes the new African-American man as he goes back to the south, with money in his pocket and a new sensibility about himself. When Memphis reenters the south, he will not attempt to use ineffective legal methods; instead, he will take back what is his. After witnessing Sterling's expression of black rage, Memphis will use the same power (along with the fortitude he received from Aunt Ester) to announce that Memphis Lee is back to reclaim his "ham." Before Memphis is transformed, however, he is highly critical of Hambone.

Memphis is hypercritical of Hambone because he will not take his ham; he even asserts that Lutz is not going to *give* Hambone his ham; this is a hypocritical statement since Memphis did not take *his* ham in 1931, and is still not *taking* it before May 1969 (Two Trains Running 28). Memphis states that Hambone's behavior is indicative of the complacency of the Old South, where he used to live and which he will try to fight at the end of the play. Since there is a connection between Memphis and Hambone, one might wonder why Memphis does not take Hambone's ham for him, or at least attempt to understand Hambone's situation. The answer would be because Memphis had not visited Aunt Ester yet.

A large bulk of the play deals with Memphis's battle with the city over his restaurant. Memphis is able to fight European-American men and be victorious in 1969 because of the social change and civil rights legislation that had occurred in America since 1931. Thus, at this point in his life, before he visits Aunt Ester, Memphis represents Civil Rights ideology. Memphis challenges the European-

American establishment within the establishment's rules—by going to court—and wins. Although this court battle proves successful, this is not Memphis's real fight. His real fight is internal; he must ask himself what kind of African-American man is he? And what will motivate him to go back to the south, where his actual battle is awaiting.

At the beginning of the play, Memphis is skeptical of those who advocate Black Power and follow Aunt Ester, so he is skeptical of the black future (as represented by Black Power) and past (as symbolized through Aunt Ester). By the end of Act One, as Memphis is gearing up for his fight with the city, he has fired his ineffectual African-American lawyer and hired a European-American one, basically telling everyone, with his actions, that the European-American man is needed to take care of business. So, instead of being autonomous and/or turning to the past, Memphis goes in the opposite direction. By the end of the play, however, Memphis does take matters into his own hands and embraces the past—all because he went to Aunt Ester.

As will happen with Sterling, when Memphis visits the past, he will recognize that part of his responsibility is to care for the whole African-American society. Before visiting Aunt Ester, Memphis bordered on rude to Hambone; after the visit, when Memphis hears of Hambone's death, his pain is both poignant and telling because at this point in the play, he has a greater connection to the entire African-American community. With his new understanding, Memphis now feels the pain of Hambone, the pain of the people.

Wilson says that there is a subconscious connection between Memphis and Hambone. In an interview with Shannon, Wilson states, "Memphis can see himself in

Hambone: 'Man [Hambone] been 'round here saying the same thing for ten years.' Well, Memphis has been around for ten years, too. He [Memphis] has to come to see that" ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson" 552). Memphis will "come to see that" by the end of the play.

Since Wilson is using Memphis, Hambone, and Sterling to show a progression, it is necessary that Wilson provide connections between the three characters. Bogumil elaborates on the link between Memphis, Sterling and Hambone, and also elucidates the issue of Hambone's sanity:

> After contemplating buying Hambone his coveted ham, Sterling realizes that what appears to be madness in Hambone is actually his focus for living […] Hambone has chosen to stand up for his material rights. The fact that he takes his quest for compensation so far that it consumes his consciousness appears superficially like madness, but Hambone has more in common with Memphis than Memphis would like to believe. Although Memphis treats Hambone rather roughly throughout the play, [his demand that the city is going to meet his price] expresses the ethos of Hambone's [mantra]. Like Hambone, Memphis has been denied what was his by right. Both have been exploited by whites who used either their own standards or legal subtleties to justify their actions. Hambone's history is muted. Though the few words he utters in the course of the play refer to one event in his life, the scars that cover his body silently recall a long history of suffering, of which the last nine and (sic) half years are only one part (Understanding August Wilson 108-109).

What Sterling sees in Hambone's quest for his ham ("his focus for living") is an inkling of Black Power and warrior spirit. Sterling knows that he should not take this power away from Hambone; in fact, he encourages Hambone by successfully teaching him a Black Power slogan—"Black is Beautiful." This is a momentous occasion for a number of reasons: one, it bonds Hambone and Sterling, which will play out through the end of the play. Two, it shows Hambone momentarily making some progress out of his old habits. Three, what Hambone says is significant—"Black Is Beautiful." This phrase, coming out of Hambone's mouth, is important

because this moment bridges the two eras. Unfortunately, what Sterling does not realize at this point is that Hambone will never adopt Black Power, and thus his black rage will always be ineffective. Because of this ineffectualness, Hambone will never get his ham on his own.

Although Hambone's actions are ineffective, Holloway defends the honor in what Hambone is doing to the other characters and also suggests how he could have accomplished his goals in a more effective way. According to Holloway, Hambone's actions mean that he will not sacrifice his pride or his conviction to the European-American man, which is better than giving into him (Understanding August Wilson 99). If Hambone had visited Aunt Ester, Holloway submits, instead of just expecting the European-American man to give him what he is due, he probably would have gotten his ham and been okay (Two Trains Running 23). As proof of Holloway's claims, after Sterling visits Aunt Ester, his black rage is activated, and he takes Hambone's ham, since in death Hambone is no longer able to fight the good fight.

Wilson uses plants and a perception shift to show the reader that Black Power is a more effective ideology to follow than Civil Rights. This is realized when Sterling's rage is activated, leading to his defense of Hambone's memory and quest. Memphis telling Hambone to get his ham (in front of Sterling) is the first plant, alluding to eventual victory for Hambone. Once Hambone dies, Sterling will take Memphis up on his request. When Sterling takes Hambone's ham, the second and third plants—when Sterling said he and Hambone have a connection, and told him to stick with him and they will get his ham—comes to fruition. A Black Power slogan—"United We Stand, Divided We Fall"—is a plant that describes Sterling's relationship with the dead Hambone at the end of the play, and is the motivator for

Sterling's actions. The actualization of the climactic plant occurs when Sterling realizes that as long as Hambone is alive, he must work toward getting his ham. Once Hambone is dead, this activates the perception shift from Sterling sympathizing with Hambone's plight to taking action to get Hambone what he is due. Sterling's action combats the "long history of suffering" Hambone has endured. This manifestation of rage also cements the symbiotic relationship between Sterling and Hambone. When Sterling breaks into Lutz's Meat Market at the end of the play, this is his expression of black rage, and it is effective and victorious.

Using the character of Sterling, Wilson suggests that contemporary African Americans need Aunt Ester (the past) and Malcolm X (the future—Black Power) to change their lives, just as African Americans in 1969 did (Elkins 208). The tenets of Black Power are still a viable philosophy today, but Wilson suggests Black Power is not enough—it needs the direction of the past to activate it fully. As Sterling retrieves Hambone's ham, he emphasizes the effectiveness of his Black Power leanings, enacting Malcolm X's slogan "By Any Means Necessary," and impacts the entire community, demonstrating revolutionary change. This is a goal of Black Power—to effect radical social transformation. This is Wilson's blueprint for contemporary African Americans—use the past and Black Power to transform the world.

Conclusion

Two Trains Running shows that it is necessary to fight for what you believe you deserve, as long as you also recognize how the past can empower you (Memphis, Sterling). Wilson uses black rage to show the development of the African-American male in the 1960s. By depicting three different stages, Wilson is able to illustrate the

effectiveness of using black rage to effect social change. In 1931, Memphis was not able to express his black rage to his oppressors, and Wilson demonstrates that this defeat has stayed with Memphis for more than thirty years. Memphis is the character that does the most changing. Memphis's character transition would not have been as clear without Hambone and Sterling. Memphis's final test will be as a man who adopts Black Power.

Demonstrating the racial progress that occurred between 1931 and 1960, Wilson allows Hambone's black rage to be activated, causing him to confront, albeit ineffectively, his oppressor. Wilson uses Hambone to show that African Americans have gained civil rights as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, but these victories are not enough. One reason why Hambone's actions are ineffective is because his past is unknown. Hambone's life extends beyond the start of this play, yet none of the characters know very much about him. Although Hambone does not embrace the past (i.e., he never visits Aunt Ester), Wilson does uses him to show that African Americans need to fight unyieldingly for what they believe they are owed, even if they never receive it.

Sterling's expression of rage is what African Americans should emulate. This rage is effectively actualized once he recognizes how to combine his Black Power tenets with healing power of Mother Africa, as represented by Aunt Ester. When this happens, Wilson presents an African American who is not only brave enough to confront European Americans (the Albert family), but to take what he feels is due from them. Wilson utilizes black rage as a structural tool, leading his reader on a journey that depicts how the expression of black rage changed over a decade known for its revolutions. Finally, Wilson declares that Black Power and black rage, when

stimulated by the past, are both effective tools for contemporary African Americans. This has been Wilson's goal with this entire play cycle—to advocate that the African-American community must respect and embrace their past.

Conclusion

The Components in Wilson's Plays

As was shown in this work, black rage is not a static entity, it changes and shape-shifts as the society alters, as laws are created, and as time marches on. I suggest that black rage will be present in Wilson's more current plays, as it is present in plays that took place almost a century ago. Black rage did not disappear from Wilson's plays as the cycle progressed, it just changed. In most of Wilson's works, rage heals his characters, however, in two of the plays, black rage leads to murder. In all of the works, however, the significance of the rage, especially when it is used to inspire action in Wilson's characters, is paramount.

In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, black rage motivates Loomis to realize his link to his African ancestors, and the strength they can provide him. Wilson depicts how rage, when it is repressed, can lead to displaced violence in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. This play is set in 1927, and still today, black-on-black crime is killing members of the African-American community, just as Levee murdered Toledo, the hope for his African-American community. In his text, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare, James H. Cone explains the plight of Levee and his kin, as well as the consequences:

> It is not easy to survive in a society that says you do not count. Many do not survive. […] many young African-Americans have no respect for themselves or for anybody else. […] If something radical is not done soon to put an end to this madness, the African-American community will soon commit genocide against itself (317).

Wilson and, to a lesser degree, I am fighting against this catastrophe. For example, Wilson's message with Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is a warning—to recognize, as

hooks advocates, how past and present instances of racism can trigger negative manifestations of black rage-inspired violence. In The Piano Lesson, the articulation of black rage, once again, is utilized as a positive, healing response, this time in reply to the effects of slavery and current oppression. The second and last expression of black rage as a negative agent occurs in Seven Guitars. Hedley is trying to please his dead father by becoming what his father thinks he should be, indicating that he does not possess his own identity. Because of this, he rages throughout the play, however, his major present manifestation of black rage does not occur until Floyd gives up on his identity and takes on a persona that does not fit him, after his rage is triggered. Wilson suggests with these two characters that it is necessary to know who you are, and not let others, even those close to you, define your identity. Because when this happens, and black rage is thrown into the mix, violence thrives in this breeding ground. In Fences, Wilson uses the Maxsons to show how black rage, activated by oppression, can move through a family, causing it to splinter, creating familial black rage patterns. Neither Troy's father nor Troy realized how family history and oppression caused them to run their respective sons out of their houses. It will take Troy's son, Cory, to recognize, with the help of an old family song and Raynell, this pattern, and break it, symbolizing that he is of a new generation. The last play in this study—Two Trains Running—depicts the progression from Civil Rights to Black Power ideologies, how black rage is expressed in both movements, and which is most effective. Wilson represents this trajectory and the arguments that come out of it through three characters, each of whom symbolize different eras. Memphis represents the pre-Civil Rights era, Hambone stands for the Civil Rights period, and Sterling signifies the Black Power age. By presenting these allegorical characters,

Wilson does what he has been doing with his entire cycle—portraying the African-American identity.

In each of the six plays examined, black rage is not the only through-line; each of these plays also deal with the significance of recognizing one's identity, which in Wilson's plays is referred to as the characters' song. Not surprisingly, in the two plays where black rage is used negatively, the characters that are raging do not find their songs. Characters can either literally find their songs, as Berniece (in The Piano Lesson) and Cory do, or figuratively uncover them, as Loomis does. In each of the plays, characters sing, oftentimes in order to express their pain. Even when his plays do not have an obvious musical angle, the blues dictate how Wilson writes his characters and creates their pasts, pain, and joy.

For Wilson, the answers to African-Americans' current problems all reside in the past. Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon explains the totality of the past in Wilson's plays and future, as she states, "Wilson believes that, for African Americans, the psychological journey back is a therapeutic mission, complete only when they are pointing toward the future equipped with knowledge of all that is good, bad, or ugly about their rich cultural heritage" (The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson 191). In each of Wilson's plays, at least one character goes back to past, to obtain strength, or runs from the past, to avoid the pain that is housed there, or both. What Wilson is doing with his cycle of history plays is presenting his non-African-American audience with the richness that is so present in African-American life. For Wilson's African-American audience, if they already acknowledge the fertile experience, Wilson uses his plays to encourage a communion with their ancestors, to

acknowledge the power in both the triumphs and tribulations of racism, and to help current African Americans avoid the mistakes of the past.

These errors of yesteryear are oftentimes presented in Wilson's work through storytelling/monologue. Wilson expresses his characters' pain and grief through these stories. Though I refer to Levee's blues solo as his defining monologue, in Wilson's plays, "defining monologue" is almost redundant since all of the monologues, all of the stories Wilson has his characters tell, are illustrative moments. Loomis and Bynum in Joe Turner's Come and Gone use monologue, and straight storytelling to define their characters to each other, the audience, and themselves. In Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the Wilson play that most explicitly uses music, storytelling is housed within a musical motif. Characters do not just tell stories, they riff, they vamp, or they present a blues solo. Though characters in this play actually sing the blues, if Wilson had put their stories to music, they could easily serve as newly discovered blues songs. Since The Piano Lesson is about legacy and how slavery haunts the Charles family, it is crucial that Wilson tells this history, which he does through stories—both ghost stories and stories about the old days during slavery. In Seven Guitars, the depth of Hedley's problems are often revealed through storytelling; these include stories about his father, and past expressions of black rage that turned violent. Troy Maxson is one of Wilson's most obvious storytellers. Like most able storytellers, with Troy's stories, his audience (including Wilson's audience) never knows if he is telling the truth. Whether true or not, at this point in Troy's life, he believes every story he tells, whether the story is about the Negro Leagues, the Devil, or Death itself. These stories form who Troy is, and determines his actions. In Two Trains Running, Wilson presents two historical movements, and its antecedent,

and asks which one is best. Though both choices are present in the play, Wilson uses storytelling most obviously to elucidate events that *impact* the two movements. Wilson accomplishes this through the use of Loud Talking, which allows him to put his audience actively within the history. They should not just listen to the history, they should challenge themselves, and figure out where they fit within the history. Within these stories and plays, Wilson depicts African-American life, black rage, oppression, and racism, tragedies and triumphs, joy, and heartbreak, and what these topics mean for America's future.

Where Are We? Now, Where Do We Go From Here?

From this text, one should better understand Wilson and his body of work, how black rage analysis elucidates Wilson's message, and why the following conventions are significant to some members of the African-American community specifically, and American society, in general: identity, music, the past, and storytelling.

Wilson's cycle of history plays is significant for three reasons: one, this major task has never been done before. Two, as Wilson says, his cycle is a roughly 400 year old autobiography of African Americans and America, as well as a dramatic history ("Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview With August Wilson" 539, 557). This work and Wilson's cycle are relevant *because* they both elucidate America's aggregated past, and project into its collective future. Third, Wilson's cycle is a social document. I argue that the significance of this cycle and this work is that African Americans (anybody actually, but African Americans specifically) can go to Wilson's works or this text to find out who they are, and how they fit within American society. Wilson's body of work is sometimes a cautionary tale, but always

a map for African-American life, especially how to navigate the obstacles of oppression.

With these cycle plays, Wilson has chosen to undertake an important project—depicting African-American life and history—and he is doing an admirable job. The only real area for improvement is Wilson's depiction of the African-American woman. In the six plays I examine, only three (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, and Fences) show women raging; and in two of the three (Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Fences), female rage is downplayed in favor of male characters' rage. In the other three plays, women serve as story points, usually in relation to their association with male characters. Although Wilson has stated that he is writing from a male perspective because he is a male, as he continues his cycle, he might give some consideration to beefing up women's roles in his plays, to widen his options as he tells the story of African Americans.

As I wrote this, I challenged and confirmed what it meant *for me* to be an African American in this society right now. African-American playwright George C. Wolfe, in his play, The Colored Museum, helps me with this answer, and forms a kinship with Wilson, as he writes, "I'm not what I was ten years ago or ten minutes ago. I'm all of that and then some. And whereas I can't live inside yesterday's pain, I can't live without it. […] My power is in my … […] colored contradictions" (513-514). Wilson's cycle of plays shows that African-American life is ever changing, and it is unnecessary to run from the pain. Instead, I must use it and "my colored contradictions" to determine who I am. This is my wish for other African Americans—to use a body of work that is already present, ready, and waiting to gain a greater self-awareness as African Americans. I suggest that when people know

themselves, especially oppressed people, this knowledge provides them with armor, so they can do battle. Wilson is attempting to strengthen the African-American community with his play cycle, and it is my hope that this text does likewise. This is the significance of this dissertation, *my* social document.

Wilson's race politics can be summed up as follows: Black Nationalism/Power, Separatism, the South, and Self-Determination. Black Nationalists want African Americans to be independent and cognizant of how politics impress upon society. These nationalists also advocate racial pride and resistance to racial oppression. Wilson's characters strive to be independent in the midst of an oppressive America. Wilson's body of work is representative of his embrace of his racial self-esteem and his resistance to racial persecution. As I have worked on this dissertation, I have recognized that I am in agreement with most of Wilson's nationalist representations. I am a proponent of the action that Black Power demands. The only aspect of Black Nationalism that I do not follow is its separatist slant.

With Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech, he is clearly calling for separatist theater. Wilson wants an African-American theater for African-American directors, actors, playwrights, etc., with no European-American support, yet he expects European-Americans to financially support the theater. I am critical of this contradictory message. While I embrace plays with all-African-American casts, because of the social and financial structure in America, especially as it relates to professional theater, it seems nearly impossible to start and sustain an all African-American theater company without white support. Wilson himself recognizes the impossibility of this endeavor. During his Town Hall debate with Robert Brustein, an audience member asked him why he did not start an African-American theater, and

debut his plays there, instead of on the Great White Way. Wilson's weak response was he is a playwright, not a producer. As a playwright, it is interesting that none of Wilson's characters call for a separate nation. Looking at Wilson's race politics, his separatist view is one of his weaker positions, the other is his call to return to the south.

Wilson believes that African Americans will never achieve great strength in American society unless they return to the south, where their roots are. While I do agree that it is necessary to understand one's roots, I do not believe that this empowerment has to occur in the south. African Americans have been in Americans cities in great force for most of the 20th Century, so it is not necessary to return to the land to know who you are. As I have pointed out throughout the dissertation, land is no longer the cash crop it once was, so there is no financial draw to return to the south. In spite of this, Wilson has characters in three out of six plays (The Piano Lesson, Seven Guitars, and Two Trains Running) go back to the South. In each of these instances, the characters believe they will find themselves in the south.

This self-determination is also a part of Wilson's race politics and his Black Nationalism. There is at least one character in each of the six plays I examine that is trying to determine who they are. These characters are trying to understand themselves (and their history) in order to define themselves. I definitely see the correlation between history and definition. I agree with this part of Wilson's message, what he is saying to some members of the African-American community. Wilson is telling African Americans, who have been defined by others for most of our tenure in American society, that it is mandatory that we define who we are. Self-

determination, whether it works or not, is one of the major through-lines in Wilson's cycle, and this dissertation.

Though I am done with this specific project, there is still more work to be done. The next step for me in my analysis of August Wilson, his works, and how black rage impacts both is to see how Wilson's latest plays—a re-working of Jitney, one of Wilson's first plays, which covers the 1970s, and King Hedley II, his 1980's play, which is a sequel to Seven Guitars—fit into the genealogy I have presented in this work. It will be informative to examine how black rage resonates in Wilson's successive plays, specifically in King Hedley II; does black rage maintain its social relevancy, especially as revolutionary agent, during the decadent, Reagan-driven 1980s? How does racism and black rage shift, as Wilson's plays become more contemporary? It is possible that Wilson's characters will begin to express a more middle class rage, as is depicted in Ellis Cose's The Rage of a Privileged Class. In this text, Cose interviews bourgeoisie and professional African Americans, illuminating the hardships they *still* face in American society, and the rage they feel (but oftentimes hide) as a result. Unfortunately, the money these success stories have accumulated does not wholly protect them from the oppression that hangs over Wilson's characters like a noose.

While racism, a topic at least as old as this country, will seemingly always be a component of dissertations and books that examine American history, what will be difficult for future theater scholars who choose to deal with Wilson and his works is maintaining momentum. Though I argue that Wilson, his works, and their messages are as relevant as when Wilson began his cycle of history plays, judging from the critical response, Wilson is not the playwriting powerhouse he was when he wrote Ma

Rainey's Black Bottom and Fences. In spite of this, following bell hooks' lead, I declare that as long as racism is present in American society, there will always be a need to understand black rage. There will also always be a need for the August Wilsons, as there will perpetually be a compulsion to analyze them and their works to help American society better understand its past, present and future, and how we all fit into the cycle of life.

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